

Song Exploder
Kimbra - Top of the World
Episode 133

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.

("Top of the World" by KIMBRA)

Hrishikesh: Kimbra is a singer from New Zealand. Her first album came out in 2011. In 2013, she won two Grammys for her collaboration she did with Gotye, for the multi-platinum hit song "Somebody That I Used to Know." In this episode, Kimbra breaks down a song of hers from 2018 called "Top of the World." Collaboration is a big part of this song, too. Coming up, Kimbra traces how musical experiments she made with Skrillex and with Diplo ended up getting transformed into different parts of this song.

("Top of the World" by KIMBRA)

Kimbra: My name is Kimbra.

(Music fades)

Kimbra: The start of this song happened at Skrillex studio. We met backstage at Coachella. And then, you know, we talked about hanging out because we were both living in the same part of town in LA. He invited me over to his studio and we were just like listening to beats together. I was playing him some of my demos. He was playing me things he had, and pulls up this beat.

(Beat)

Kimbra: [Mimics the beat] This almost seance-like trance beat. I'm like, "Yo, this is really sick," and I started, you know, just moving along to it, and I guess I just started singing along.

(Beat ends)

Kimbra: [Sings vocal part] Just kind of made this noise with my mouth, like a kind of low, I guess almost didgeridoo or something, you know, quite textural. And he's like, "That's sick, let's record it!"

(Vocals with beat)

Kimbra: The beauty of Skrillex, working with him, is he's so fast and he just presses "record" and I'm singing it into the [laughter] mic at the computer.

(Vocals with beat)

Kimbra: And we start layering it.

(Vocals with beat)

(Music fades)

Kimbra: At that point, I wasn't really thinking about what the song would be about or even if it would be for me. I mean a lot of the time when you're writing, especially with DJs, you don't know where that stuff's going to end up. So it didn't get very far in terms of arrangement that day. We decided to kind of sit on it for a bit, he had it on his computer, so he pulled it up with a bunch of people who were coming through his studio. I remember him texting me being like, "Yo, Anderson .Paak really digs it! Like he's going to put something down!" and, "I'm with Vic Mensa and he's going to try something!" And I was like, "Oh, that's dope!" Like just I love that idea of making something, and then just letting it kind of go out into the universe, and see where it flies. But I think it was always assumed that if a rapper ended up taking the track that I would be involved, you know. I love to work with artists and collaborate, so considering I kind of already had this presence on the song with this ominous backing vocal, I assumed that I would write some hooks and maybe someone would take the verses. But nothing had really developed with any of the other rappers, and so I started to kind of experiment with it myself, you know, in my sort of home studio and trying different approaches. And I started to feel like maybe this was a moment that I could try to, you know, go all the way on. And Skrillex, he was like, "Yeah man, you should go for it."

(Beat)

Kimbra: Because I knew there were a lot of rappers trying ideas on this song, it sparked an idea in me to kind of try my hand at, like, a more rhythmic way of singing. You know, I've done a lot of cathartic, full-voice singing on my records, but with a beat that's so hypnotic and so sort of monotonal, it didn't really feel like the right

song to get *highly* melodic and sort of flourishing and kind of doing lots of trills. It felt like it needed a very urgent, almost protest-like approach in the vocal. I wanted to find a way to meet that energy, of where the track was going, so I approached it more like a spoken word, you know. But there was no real lyrics at that point. So I did gibberish vocals over it, just kind of mapping out certain pockets.

(Vocals with beat)

(Music fades)

Kimbra: John Congleton is a producer from Texas. He came on board when the song was just drums, and a drone, and me kind of doing gibberish over the track. I consider him to be the person that kind of helped me pull all the puzzle pieces together into something cohesive. He was the first person to put a drop on the song, like add the 808,

(808)

Kimbra: and a snare,

(Beat joins)

Kimbra: which totally changed the feeling, because now all of a sudden, you could, like, really bump to the song and the groove, it was heavy, you know. Blasting it in the studio, we were like, "This is hot!"

(Music ends)

Kimbra: I had a habit on this album of taking bike rides through New York City and [laughter] I learnt it about myself on this album. I need a sense of danger, I think, to tap into my spontaneous lyrical brain. You know, I'd be sitting in my studio in Manhattan and sort of mulling over lyrics, sitting, listening to the track, trying to decipher my own gibberish, *what is the song about?* And I just couldn't, you know, I was hitting walls left, right and center. But I got on a bike, and, you know,

(NYC street sounds)

Kimbra: and my mother would be terrified to know I'm not wearing a helmet, you know, and I'm just going through [laughter] New York City with my iPhone in my hand, right? With the beat playing.

(Beat joins)

Kimbra: And kind of, you know, sort of hanging in there, and trying not to fall [laughter] off. But I start to sing to myself, right, start to get the groove in my body as I ride through Manhattan. And it's crazy, man, so many lyrics came that way. It was something about putting myself in that place of mild anxiety, you know [laughter], the traffic of Manhattan. Like there was a sense of being really immersed in the city, and I mean it's the city of ambition. So that innocent place of striving started to come out in the song, you know, this kid who dreams of getting out into the world. And little by little, the song started to piece itself together,

(Music ends)

Kimbra: this kind of ascension to the top, the top of the world, or this kind of striving for power. And it's like a film, right? You need your beginning, middle, and end. So I wanted each verse to represent a different stage of the journey. It starts with an innocent ambition. And then little bit of sinister influence starts to edge into the song, something feels a little darker as someone becomes more and more besotted with this feeling of power, this lust for success. I wanted it to be a character that was now sort of drunkenly delusional on this ascension.

(Vocals: "See me on tele / See me on billboards and banners / See me white picket fences")

(Vocals fade)

Kimbra: You know, I really wanted to actually take on the feeling of what it might be like to become kind of drunk on your own sense of self-importance [laughter], and kind of falling into that space of blindness, you know, where you've led people to believe one thing and you're not sure if you believe it anymore. And there's a moment in the song where the vulnerability kind of comes through, and it asks, you know, "And it's crazy, undefined, brand new / It's amazing I got high on a view / But tonight I'm feeling tired and alone / Dear Lord, I hope we didn't go wrong."

(Vocals: "And it's crazy, undefined, brand new / It's amazing I got high on a view / But tonight I'm feeling tired and alone / Dear Lord, I hope we didn't go wrong")

Kimbra: When you're at the top, do you look back and wonder, you know, was it all worth it? And by the fourth verse, this character is now close to losing its mind, you know, "I feel like a god."

(Vocals: "I think I'm winning / Feel like I might / Feels like I'm in it / Feel like a god")

Kimbra: It's really fun to use vocal effects to play into the theater.

(Processed vocals: "Feel like a god")

Kimbra: And that is a big part of this song. So in the second verse of the song, when it says,

(Vocals: "Euphoria / I missed you like a new treasure")

Kimbra: I pitched up the spoken lyric a fourth, and you get this kind of new harmony that enters.

(Processed vocals: "Euphoria / I missed you like a new treasure")

Kimbra: And even though I'm not really singing, it's sort of suggesting a note, which isn't really in the scale at all of this song, which creates this alien feeling and a sense of kind of subtle invasion, and it is a little sinister, you know, it gives it a kind of atonality.

(Vocals: "Euphoria / I missed you like a new treasure / We go so good together / Search all my life to find better")

(808)

Kimbra: I was definitely super aware of the political climate when I was writing this, and as a New Zealander living in America, watching how people rise through a campaign, right? How they start with just like their signs out on the white picket fences, and I even reference that in the lyric, you know, "See me on television, on billboards and banners, on white picket fences," like, you know, there's something, again, admirable about this kind of journey of ascension and making yourself known to the world. And it's been very interesting to witness how things

turn, how things twist, how things turn nasty once they started with such good intentions, how things warp.

(808 ends)

Kimbra: At that point, I needed a break from this incessant spoken chant of the main character. I wanted to contrast the spoken word with something a lot more melodic. I was doing a few demos for Diplo at the time. And me and Diplo had this song we were working on for a Korean artist called CL. And I wrote this vocal and it had this really hooky little section.

(Vocals with synth)

Kimbra: I remember texting one day, and being like, "Hey, I'm listening back to that demo and is like, is CL going to use it, you know?" He's like, "She's kind of going down a different road with the album, and I think for now it's just in limbo." I'm like, "Is it cool if I use it? I think it could really work with this song I'm recording at the moment." He's like, "Go for it." I had to do a bunch of re-pitching like to get this kind of vocal chant into the right key. But the great thing that happens when you're doing basic pitch shift work, is it starts to take on the quality of a sample. You know, terrible sounds all over it and pops and everything, which is totally an aesthetic.

(Processed vocals: "On my knees, all my life I've been sold a chase")

Kimbra: It kind of became something that sounds like a kid's chant. And I really liked the contrast of like a heavy, tough beat

(Beat)

Kimbra: with this euphoric chant of youthfulness.

(Processed vocals join: "Hustling hope for dollars, try cope a day (a day)")

(Music ends)

Kimbra: So I had all these melodic aspects now, which felt good, but I needed the music to follow that, you know, I needed the chords to actually speak to that. Right now, everything was droning on one note. So this is the fun part, you know, where I started to call in favorite musicians of mine. Lars Horntveth, who plays in

a band called Jaga Jazzist from Norway, was in New York, and we were working on the song together. He was the first person to kind of suggest a chordal movement under the song.

(Piano with keyboard)

Kimbra: That progression you hear is something that Lars first played out at my place in Manhattan. When the vocal chant is going, “On my knees, all,” we have chords that actually sit underneath that and move around that so that you kind of get more emotion from these words.

(Vocals with piano and keyboard: “On my knees, all my life I’ve been sold a chase / Hustling hope for dollars, try cope a day (a day)”)

(Music ends)

Kimbra: And then we got on the Prophet.

Hrishikesh: The Prophet’s an analog synthesizer from the late 70s, early 80s.

Kimbra: We got on the Prophet and played around with kind of a sound that would be really ferocious on the song, right, something that would jump out of the speakers. We’re just flicking through presets and we found this insane Prophet preset that goes, [imitates roaring sound].

(Synth)

Kimbra: So finding the sound gave us this like new character,

(Synth)

Kimbra: that would kind of burst out of the speakers.

(Synth)

(Synth ends)

Kimbra: When we got to the end of the song, we both agreed that it would be so fun to kind of give it one final climax. You know, take it to some chords that suggested an arrival or, I guess, the final ascension, you know, if this is the story about a

character who rises to the top and is eventually blinded by its kind of singular pursuit of one thing, but we have to do that musically.

(Keyboard)

Kimbra: So he started playing along these chords and moving the bassline underneath the vocals and it felt really exciting.

(Studio conversation between Kimbra and Lars)

Kimbra: And instead of the bassline just moving on the downbeat of every hit of the drums, it now started to be preemptive. That makes the whole thing kind of feel quite urgent and exciting.

(Synth, 808, and beat)

Kimbra: The bass is now jumping ahead of the beat and it's doing these new flourishes.

(Synth, 808, and beat)

(Music ends)

Kimbra: That's when the chords come in at the end, over the final vocal chant, "We prayed from the gutters, like martyrs we followed you." So, to me, this is the crowds of people who invested all their trust in this idol, you know, so it needs to be emotional.

(Vocals with synth: "We prayed from the gutters / Like martyrs we followed you / Prayed from the gutters / Like martyrs we followed you")

Kimbra: It's my favorite moment of the song in a way because the production gets so thick and wide. And then zoom,

(Beat)

Kimbra: comes right back to that very kind of micro, primal place of just the drums and the vocal. The sense of urgency is pushed onto the song before it all collapses and falls to pieces, you know, "They built me up to be beaten." That's the final sentiment of the song.

(Vocals with beat: "Uphill, I'm winning / Not concerned if I'm cheating / They built me up to be beaten / They built me up to be beaten")

Kimbra: The song's a cautionary tale. We wanted to be, of course, empowering. But it's a warning too, you know, it's a siren. It starts from a place of innocence but winds up in a space of delusion.

(Keyboard)

Kimbra: It's a space where we have to ask a few questions like: "Am I really fighting for the right thing here [laughter]? What price will I pay to attain it? How far will one go?" I like to ask those questions, because I see it in myself. I see my own desire to be larger than life, to exceed my wildest expectations. But I also see, like, a disconnect that can emerge from that as well. We've all tasted power, we've all tasted that feeling of being able to be above others and

(Music ends)

Kimbra: God, it's enticing, isn't it?

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Top of the World," by Kimbra, in its entirety.

("Top of the World" by KIMBRA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/kimbra to learn more about Kimbra, and to find links to buy or stream this song.
Next time on Song Exploder, Arcade Fire.

("Put Your Money On Me" by ARCADE FIRE)

Hrishikesh: This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. The illustrations on the Song Exploder website are by Carlos Lerma. 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. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder, where you can share your thoughts on this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Put Your Money On Me" by ARCADE FIRE)

(Music fades)

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