

**Song Exploder**  
**Moses Sumney - Quarrel**  
**Episode 129**

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: This episode contains explicit language.

*("Quarrel" by MOSES SUMNEY)*

Hrishikesh: Moses Sumney is a singer-songwriter based in Los Angeles. His first album, *Aromanticism*, came out in September, 2017, but before that, he'd already worked with an impressive and diverse list of collaborators, from Sufjan Stevens, to Solange, to Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, to Skrillex. That spirit continues with the song Moses takes apart in this episode. It has contributions from producers Cam O'bi, and Paris Strother, and legendary bassist Thundercat. Here is Moses Sumney breaking down his song, "Quarrel."

*("Quarrel" by MOSES SUMNEY)*

*(Music fades)*

Moses: My name is Moses Sumney. When I was making my album, I was looking for a manager at the time. And one of the managers I was meeting with suggested like, "Oh you know, you should get in the studio with this guy, Cam O'bi." and I was super reluctant to do it because it's such an LA thing, for like songwriters to go to sessions with random producers or other songwriters, but I hated that. Cam's a brilliant producer, but most of the stuff he's done has been either hip hop stuff or R&B stuff. And so, typically I would have said, "No," but I think I was just curious about what could happen. I ended up really loving Cam. The first session that we had for the song was in 2015. We had met for the first time, and just talked about music for like, two hours, and we were showing each other stuff back and forth, and he showed me Stereolab for the first time.

*("Puncture In The Radak Permutation" by STEREO LAB)*

*(Music fades)*

Moses: And I showed him, like, some Radiohead stuff I liked.

*("Pyramid Song" by RADIOHEAD)*

Moses: And just went back and forth, playing each other's stuff for like two hours, and that inspired us to go out into the world and make something.

*(Music fades)*

Moses: He started making this beat.

*(Drum machine)*

Moses: This kind of drum machine, the like, "tick, tock, tock, tick." I was very intrigued by the kind of vintage vibe it had, you know. I started messing around on the guitar, just messing with a few chords.

*(Drum machine ends)*

*(Acoustic guitar)*

*(Drum machine joins)*

Moses: And Cam, he had a keyboard, he's a really great keyboard player. And he just started laying down this keyboard part.

*(Drum machine ends)*

*(Rhodes plays)*

Moses: And we went back and forth on these four chords.

*(Acoustic guitar joins)*

Moses: It reminded me of a really nice lullaby. At that point, I was pretty inspired. I was listening to the drum machine and the keyboard.

*(Rhodes along with drum machine)*

Moses: And I really just started singing in my head, and trying to make a feel for melodies. And then I just went into the booth and freestyled.

*(Music fades)*

*(Freestyle vocals)*

Moses: I typically find melodies by going in and just singing forever [laughter] until something emerges.

*(Freestyle vocals)*

Moses: So I came away from that with the Rhodes sound recorded, and the drum machine, and one of those gibberish takes. And there's a little kalimba sound in there too, that Cam recorded.

*(Demo vocals, Rhodes, drum machine and kalimba)*

Moses: That was the first day.

*(Demo fades)*

Moses: And then I didn't see him again for a very long time. The next time I remember working on the song is when I went on a cruise. I got a random email [laughter], just being like, "Hey, do you want to come on this Ted Talk cruise for seven days, and sing two songs?" [Laughter] So I went on this cruise, where they got the top marine biologists in the world, and the patrons who would fund their work to go on a trip across the pacific ocean and talk about oceans, which was, like, a really beautiful time, but also incredibly strange. Just like, surrounded by people who were very different from me, you know, scientists and very, very rich people. Because they would say some bizarre shit. They're true environmentalists, like, "We have to save the fish, we have to save the coral reef." And then at dinner time, they turn around and say like, "All the black people who do social work that I've come in touch with are, they're so out of touch. Like, they're pushing for like racial rights but we're all just one human race. So why are they trying to make things better for people of color when it's like, they should be thinking about everybody, you know." That was pretty bizarre to me, just thinking like, "Oh, you can see the ways in which the environment is oppressed, but you can't see the ways in which other human beings are oppressed." That's when I started thinking about the like themes in the song. I had this little cabin on the boat, and that's where I wrote most of the lyrics for this. I was thinking about the distance between people of different social groups, and that's what inspired a lot of the tune.

The song is about power. And it's about two people in a relationship who are from different backgrounds, and so that could either be race or class or gender. Looking back in my life at relationships that I had had with people from different backgrounds who saw us as equals, and didn't realize that in the broader scope of the world, their perspective was appreciated, on a wider scale shared, on a wider scale, and elevated, and so they were coming to the table with a social power that they were discounting in the personal relationship. So the song, essentially, "Quarrel," is about the idea that you can't call a disagreement between two people simply a "lover's quarrel," because that would imply that they are equals, and you have to recognize that we're not [laughter]. That no two people come from the same background. And so, I spent a lot of time just in my cabin writing, and demoed a lot of the first vocal ideas.

*(Demo: "Don't call it a Lovers' Quarrel / Don't call it a Lovers' Quarrel")*

Moses: And so the lyrics in the pre-chorus, "With you, half the battle is proving that we're at war / I would give my life just for the privilege to ignore". You know, just trying to get you to realize that there's an issue here [laughter], that goes beyond me and you. And so, if you have two people in a relationship and one of them comes from the group that holds the most social power in society, they have to account for that privilege in that relationship, or recognize that it ain't going to work out.

*(Demo: "With you, half the battle is proving that we're at war / I would give my life just for the privilege to ignore / Don't call it a lovers' quarrel")*

Moses: The next step just became letting it sit for a while. I like to make something and then sit with it, like put it away and then revisit to see if I still like it, and if it's good enough. And so I would just drive around LA listening to that demo. And we didn't really work on it until almost a year later. I knew I wanted to change it in a lot of ways. I didn't want it to be just a beat based song. And I was listening to a lot of Joanna Newsom.

*("Leaving the City" by JOANNA NEWSOM)*

Moses: And so I was thinking, like, "How can we make this folksy?"

*(Music fades out)*

Moses: I had Cam over and I was telling him that I liked the kalimba sound, but I wanted to see if we can, like, bring a bit of folk music to it. And so I was telling him I wanted to replace the kalimba sound with a harp, and I started looking for a harp player. But I could not find a harp player for the life of me. And then Cam, he remembered seeing this harp player on Youtube, 7 or 8 years ago named Brandee Younger, and I looked her up on Youtube and instantly became obsessed. There's this wonderful NPR video of her playing with an upright bassist and it's excellent.

*(Brandee Younger playing harp on NPR)*

Moses: I looked her up on Facebook [laughter]. I, like, did a deep stalk, I was like, "I have to get this woman." And I looked at all of her friends to see if I knew anyone who knew her, and I found someone. He connected me, and then a few weeks later, I flew out to New York and went to Harlem to record her on the song.

*(Brandee Younger fades)*

Moses: We recorded her in her home, and luckily she had a spare room in her apartment in which she was used to rehearsing and recording harps, so she invited a friend of hers over, who records her sometimes, and we just took a laptop, and an interface, and a hard drive, and recorded her in her spare bedroom.

*(Harp)*

Moses: So we had her play a few, you know, like strum, just play the chords, pluck the chords, play a pattern, and then we did a few takes of just her improvising, and we ended up using a lot of the improvised stuff.

*(Harp)*

Hrishikesh: I love how you can hear the police sirens in the background.

Moses: Oh yeah [laughter], the streets of Harlem [laughter]. And then a few weeks later, I assembled a band to play what became the outro, or the reprise of the song. I'd always wanted to make a song that started with a beat and then went live. And I wanted a long song on the record, I wanted a really long song. I just like long stuff [laughter]. And I appreciate stuff, especially in this era that seeks to hold your attention. And I knew that I wanted to have a band section on the album,

where it's, like, other human beings playing together live. So I just reached out to a few people. There's Paris Strother on the keys, and she is a brilliant piano keyboard player. And I'd always wanted to do something with her. So that day started with me and Paris sitting down, and I taught her the chords from the original song, and I told her my vision for it like, "Can you do this like [sings part]? What about this [sings part]," you know, because I don't really know chords, but I can sing what I'm hearing and then we figure it out from there. So that's her on the Rhodes.

*(Rhodes)*

Moses: So we did that and then taught it to the rest of the band, and then we would just jam.

*(Rhodes, drums, and bass)*

Moses: On the drums there's Jamire Williams, who's a brilliant drummer.

*(Rhodes, drums and bass)*

Moses: That section of the song was incredibly intimidating, because I'm just so not used to working in studios. I'd never run a studio session [laughter], and so to have, like, professional musicians come in, and then be like, "Alright everyone, now do this!" [Laughter] Was, like, horrifying, but wonderful, because I learned so much and we got some beautiful stuff out of it. I just, kind of, conducted it all live in the room. I'm on a microphone and I'd either be singing or I'd be like, "Alright now louder, go louder, go louder, okay now pull it back, pull it back. Let's slow it down here."

*(Rhodes, drums and bass)*

Moses: At the end of the song, I was like, "Bring it down and just go into a looser world."

*(Rhodes, drums and bass)*

Moses: But it still makes sense because, you know, Jamire's like kind of keeping time for everyone.

*(Rhodes, drums and bass fades)*

Moses: There was a different person on bass in that live trio, but I ended up replacing all of his bass with Thundercat. I always knew that I wanted Thundercat on it, but he's so hard to get in touch with. So, we had Thundercat come over on a different day to my house and he played all of his bass parts.

*(Bass)*

Moses: That whole section starts with a chord on the bass, and I like, I never imagined we'd go chordal on the bass in that moment, but he did it and I was just like, "Okay well, we have to keep that, because that's brilliant." And then there's that section where it's just like the [sings ascending bass].

*(Bass)*

Moses: That's my favorite part. That was just a take of Thundercat, like, improvising. He hinted at that, and I stopped and was like,

*(Bass stops)*

Moses: "Wait, wait, wait, that's the thing. That's what needs to be in that section," because we'd been trying to lift that section even more, like, with the synths.

*(Synths)*

*(Bass)*

*(Synths and bass fade out)*

Moses: After we did that, Paris came in again and I was just like, "Oh, can you just play the piano over that outro and just improvise?"

*(Piano)*

Moses: What we ended up doing is fading in that piano track and then fading out the band.

*(Rhodes, drums, and bass)*

*(Rhodes, drums, and bass fade)*

*(Piano)*

Moses: The other person that worked on the song is my friend Joshua Halpern, who worked on a lot of my album in, like, various engineering or production capacities. He plays the electric guitar that comes in, in the second verse. The song was too pretty, and I was just like, “We need to fuck it up [laughter].” And so, I was like, “I want a guitar thing, I want it to be electric, I want it to be really low, I want it to be dark, and I want it to be biting.”

*(Electric guitar)*

Moses: In context, it doesn't actually sound that menacing, but on its own, it's very like, [mimics the electric guitar sound], which I really like.

*(Harmonized vocals with electric guitar: “Don't call it a lovers' quarrel / Don't call it a lovers' quarrel”)*

Moses: Towards the end of high school, I joined choir, and that was my first time really singing in public. And so my interest and investment in harmonies and choral music really came from that. And I've always wanted to try to be a choir, a one-man choir.

*(Lead vocals along with harmonized choir vocals: “In the light morning will reveal the spoils of night”)*

Moses: I spent a lot of time in solitude when making this album. So many people were a part of it, but I went away and wrote alone, and tried to be as alone as possible.

*(Harmonized backing vocals: \*Oooh\*)*

Moses: And when you're alone like that, you realize a lot about yourself and you realize that you're not as simple, or at least I realized that about myself. And vocal arrangement became a way to communicate that; that I couldn't really just boil myself down to one thing.

*(Harmonized backing vocals: \*Oooh\*)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Quarrel,” by Moses Sumney, in its entirety.



*(“Quarrel” by MOSES SUMNEY)*

Hrishikesh: To learn more about Moses Sumney, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net).

Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Carlos Lerma creates original illustrations for each episode of the podcast, which you can see on the Song Exploder website and Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of creative, independent podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). If you want to share your thoughts on this episode or on the podcast in general, you can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.