

**Song Exploder**  
**PJ Morton - Say So ft. Jojo**  
**Episode 202**

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.

*("Say So" by PJ MORTON ft. JOJO)*

Hrishikesh: PJ Morton is a singer, songwriter, and producer. He's been nominated for 10 Grammys, including Best R&B album three years in a row. In 2020, he won the Grammy for the Best R&B song for his track, "Say So," which is a duet with the singer JoJo, a platinum-selling artist in her own right. But that version of "Say So" almost didn't come to exist. In this episode, PJ takes us through his original voice memos, the demos, and the isolated pieces of the final studio recording, as he tells the story of how "Say So" was created, then disappeared, and then got re-created, and ended up becoming one of his biggest songs.

*("Say So" by PJ MORTON ft. JOJO)*

PJ: My name is PJ Morton.

Hrishikesh: "Say So" came out in 2019, but PJ had his first idea for it on February 14th 2015.

*(Music fades out)*

PJ: Valentine's day. I had a really bad writer's block. Maybe one of the worst of my life. Well I should say, usually my form of writer's block is I can't write a song for myself. Sometimes, I can still, as a songwriter, write for other artists. But when I say writer's block, I mean I can't get my own thoughts out. But I would get these melodies and everything I heard, I would like, get it down because I'm like maybe this could break it.

*(Voice memo of PJ humming melodies)*

PJ: [Laughter] So I hear myself playing the bass notes and stuff because sometimes I need to give myself context of what the melody, what the - it's so funny listening back to that.

*(Voice memo of PJ humming melodies ends)*

PJ: To be totally honest, I didn't wanna be an artist in the beginning. I wanted to be just a musician, I wanted to play for people on tour. That was my biggest dream initially. And then I started to write and produce, and that's what I wanted to be, I wanted to be Quincy Jones. I wanted to write songs for other people. And what happened was I would write these songs, and they didn't fit anybody. And it was just coming from me, and I was like, "All right, well, if a melody is so much me that it can't fit someone else, then maybe you know it's just meant for me."

*(Acoustic demo)*

PJ: Because I had that idea for the song, I brought the band into the studio, let me see if this inspires me to actually write it. So we went in there and I just tried to start to build the song still without any lyrics or words. I'm playing that lead yeah. Some type of Moog. For me, as a keyboard player first, sounds inspire me. The sounds, telling me how to sing it.

*(Acoustic demo ends)*

PJ: Those melodies determine what I say.

*(Voice memo vocals brainstorm: "If you love me / Just say so")*

PJ: It's hard to listen to [laughter].

*(Voice memo vocals brainstorm: This is no competition / Not keeping score")*

PJ: Totally different words there. I had the "say so," I knew I wanted to say that. That was such a simple concept to me, if you love me, you know, just say so. I usually start at the chorus you know just because that is the grand idea for me. So once I had the chorus, then I started to say, "Okay, well, why am I asking her to just say so, you know?" So I started doing those verse voice notes.

*(Verse voice memo: "It's getting hard for me to hold my own / Cause no one wants to be in love alone")*

PJ: I've wanted somebody to just say it to me where it's like, "I know we're here, but you're not really communicating. Are you feeling how I'm feeling, you know?"

And it's something that I naturally felt connected to. 'Cause I know how that feels to want somebody to just express their feelings.

*(Acoustic demo)*

PJ: As a writer, what you're trying to always shoot for is coming from a specific place that's specific to what you feel, and you write it according to you. But you know, a bunch of people can relate to it. And that's what got me to that first verse, which is "it's getting hard for me to hold my own. Nobody wants to be in love alone."

*(Fuller demo with drum samples: "It's getting hard for me to hold my own / Nobody wants to be in love alone")*

PJ: I did an old school thing and did a maxi single. And it had the song, "First Began," "Sticking to My Guns," and it had "Say So." I put it on there as the third song, almost like I don't think it's as good as everything else. And then I think for me "Say So" was really kinda my throwaway. I knew the song spoke to me, but from a production standpoint, it just wasn't as strong as everything else that I was working on.

*(Maxi single version)*

PJ: And when I listened to that version, it's like in the way. The drums are in the way a little bit for me, even all the extra background vocals. It was just kinda in the way of this very simple message. So I pulled the whole thing.

*(Maxi single version stops)*

PJ: Just a memory man, it was just gonna be a memory. But what made me go back to it, because I was kinda done with it, 'cause I ripped the song from everywhere. So if you didn't buy it at the time, you don't have that first version. But I remember being in Australia and somebody requested it, and it was so long after that, that I didn't even remember all the words. I tried to sing it for this couple because they said they got engaged on the song or something. I'm like, "Really, that song?" And I would always see people referencing it, "Where's that song "Say So?" I used to listen to that all the time." So I was like, "I gotta take another look at it." And that's when I started from scratch really.

*(Piano)*

PJ: I just wanted to see if this was even worth my time. So I set my phone up at the piano and started to say, "All right, let's see what we're trying to say."

*(Vocal-piano brainstorm voice memo)*

PJ: Sometimes I'll build a whole track and build a song and then go to the piano and see if it still speaks to me with nothing, with none of that production.

*(Voice memo plays verse then ends)*

PJ: It was just like all right, let me give it the space it deserves so you can hear these simple words I'm trying to say to you. And I think it started to change for me immediately once I did that sort of different rhythm. It felt more like a conversation when I started to re-imagine it. I want somebody else to be saying this. I want there to be perspective here. I want it to feel like two people going through this actually. I was thinking of different singers to see who could work for this and you think that a lot of people could just sing that, because it feels simple but it's not really. And so I knew it had to be a real singer. You know it wasn't just somebody who was popping at the time. It was like, "No, I need somebody who can really emote and get this message across." And I had only met JoJo in person maybe one time prior to that. We didn't really know each other. I've always been a fan of her voice. But there was a story of her getting out of her deal, finally, that she had been stuck in for 10 years or something like that. And I was listening to her voice and I'm like, "Oh, you know what, she would be perfect for this."

Jojo: My name is JoJo. I think he asked for my email and said that there was something that he wanted to send me. Just "Hey, let me know if you like this and if you'd be interested in singing this with me." And first listen, I just loved the song. Then once I was like, "yeah!" Then we talked about, you know, who takes what part and how we could do it.

*(Piano)*

Jojo: The first verse was supposed to be me by myself initially. But once we got there, I was like, "Oh, let's do the whole first verse together."

*(PJ and JoJo first verse vocals: "It's getting hard for me to hold my own / See, nobody wants to be in love alone")*

Jojo: I thought there was something very beautiful about the fact that we were singing in octaves, in the first verse.

*(PJ and JoJo vocals and piano end)*

Jojo: It was really challenging and exciting for me to hear something that he did and be like, “let me wrap my head around that.”

PJ: I can remember her saying, “Oh, wait, you did a little curl right there.”

*(PJ octave stem: “Just say so / \*vocal run\*\*”)*

PJ: She was the one that said, “Oh no let me catch that.”

*(JoJo octave stem: “Just say so / \*mimics the same vocal run\*\*”)*

Jojo: The runs that he hears in his head are out of this world. So it was like a master class for me in playing as a vocalist.

*(PJ and JoJo vocals together: “Just say so / I need to know from you right now / before I go / \*Jojo vocal run\*\*”)*

PJ: “Oh we’re like a team, like we fit together.” So the decision to have her by herself on the second verse, I think had to do more with the building of the song. That was more of a production thing for me.

*(JoJo second verse vocals: “It’s just that I can feel I’m falling deep / And I don’t wanna fall unless you’re falling with me”)*

PJ: And that first line of the chorus I was like, “Okay, that’s the way you’re going to harmonize on top?”

*(Chorus vocals along with piano: “So if you love me, just say so, just say so / ‘Cause I can’t play these games with you no more”)*

PJ: She’s amazing, man.

*(Snaps along with piano)*

PJ: Then I started to build it and build the rhythm and the snaps and then eventually bring in that whole beat.

*(Piano ends)*

*(Drum beat)*

PJ: No hi-hat there, like it was in that original. I had little ghost snares. None of that's there, it's literally kick and block, *bo-bo-bo-ka-bo*, I wasn't trying to take the attention away from the message. I just was trying to add to it, and it needed a push but not so much of a push where it got in the way.

*(Bass)*

PJ: I play bass, but I don't really try to play bass on my records. You know I try to get real bass players. The bass player, my friend, DJ, I remember calling him last minute. And I was like, "Hey, man, can you get to the studio like now?" And I had him do it really quickly. It's just that intro and the vamp. And he was like, "Well can I do it one more time?" I was like, "Nope, that's all I need. Thank you. I like it."

*(Moog bass added)*

PJ: That has sort of become a signature of mine putting both Moog bass

*(Moog bass)*

PJ: And live bass together.

*(Bass and Moog together)*

PJ: They speak different languages down there in that register and different textures. You can't replace the human, the fingers going across those strings to give some life. But then the true bottom of that Moog, and the roundness of it and the womp-womp is something that I can't get out of the real bass. So I just let them both live in there together.

*(High Moog playing downward runs)*

PJ: That's the high end of the Moog. That's me playing three different layers of it 'cause it's mono. So I couldn't play the harmony together so this is me playing the

*(PJ mimics the downward runs with his voice)*

*(Moog mono tracks)*

PJ: They probably aren't totally aligned, you know, but they dance together. They're alive. You know, they're human. So I don't need them to be perfectly together, but it kinda just gives a rain slide to me of melody.

*(High Moog)*

PJ: The song just kept getting bigger as it went along. It was like, it started off as this little simple piano thing and then it's like voices and voices and sounds, and it was doing exactly what I wanted to feel.

*(PJ and JoJo vocals with snaps and Moog)*

PJ: I think we both, me and JoJo, both knew it when we left the studio like, "Man, we did something here. This is, this doesn't always happen."

Jojo: I felt like we were making a new classic.

PJ: That's the reason it sat where it did for years because I didn't feel that. But it's really some of my fans that made me take another look at the song, and I'm grateful because I would have left it, you know, I would have left it. I'm so happy that I didn't give up on it and really took the time to rethink it and come back to it. It makes it that much sweeter.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Say So," by PJ Morton ft. Jojo, in its entirety.

*("Say So" by PJ MORTON ft. JOJO)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Say So," and you can watch the music video for it.

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal. Carlos Lerma makes illustrations for each episode, which you can find on the Song Exploder website and instagram. 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. If you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.