

Song Exploder
Run the Jewels - JU\$T
Episode 195

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.

("JU\$T" by RUN THE JEWELS)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. Killer Mike and El-P first met in 2011. They both had established rap careers, but they entered a new era when they started making music together as Run the Jewels in 2013. They've been nominated for a Grammy, and they released their fourth album in June 2020. Like all of their albums, they made it available to download for free. In this episode, El-P and Killer Mike break down the song "JU\$T," which features guest vocals from their frequent collaborator, Zack de la Rocha from Rage Against the Machine, and guest vocals from Pharrell Williams.

("JU\$T" by RUN THE JEWELS)

Hrishikesh: Here's El-P, who produced the track.

(Music fades out)

El-P: We did a majority of the writing of this record at Rick Rubin's Studio in Shangri-La. We always like to kind of get out of our own spaces and come together in some other space, so that we could really get a vibe going. And by the time me and Mike get together in-studio, I know that I have, you know, 10 or 12 things that I think might spark something creative in both me and Mike. And sometimes it's more fleshed out but a lot of times, it's just, "Let me see if I can get a big goofy grin on my partner's face by playing this little weird thing." It's really just about getting a spark, and then trying to harness it.

*(Harmonized vocals: *ooh*)*

El-P: This one started with thinking about basing a beat around vocals, which is something that, it's not something that we had done yet together on a record. And so that's kind of what led us to experimenting with different vocal synths and things, you know. And none of that felt particularly right. And then we ended up going to somebody who had sung some backup vocals for us on some TV

performances. Nicholas Ryan Gant, who's this amazing soul singer from Brooklyn. So we kind of gave him a general spectrum of notes and this is the sort of the vibe that we're going for. And he ended up doing a bunch of different demos for us of different approaches and different parts.

(Nicholas' layered vocals)

EI-P: I really thought that I was just doing it as a way to demo it up and then in my mind we would go to, you know, someone else, but he was just so good. And he sent us a bunch of shit.

(Nicholas' layered vocals)

EI-P: What ended up in the hook were these long notes.

(Nicholas' layered vocals)

EI-P: The trick was actually not overusing it, to be honest. The trick was trying to restrain myself from layering it too much and from using too much of it because I wanted it to be bouncy and sparse and punctuated. So I started to chop it up and move it around.

(Chopped layered vocals)

EI-P: I thought it would be really cool to create a piece of music that was based really just around almost a doo-woppy harmonic thing, and have the bounce of that.

(Drum beat joins)

EI-P: And the drums was what really, you know, drove the whole thing.

(Chopped layered vocals end and drum beat remains)

(Chopped layered vocals come back in)

EI-P: And, you know, you never know what's gonna spark your friend, you know. The real linchpin is whether or not Mike feels it.

Killer Mike: I was like, "This the coolest shit in the fucking world." Like I, it just, it had what we, in the South, call a juke to it.

(Beat ends)

Killer Mike: I'm a big time Outkast fan, you know being from Atlanta. This felt like Aquemini-esque to me, and not like in sound, but in terms of what our fans are used to hearing from us. Like Aquemini did that for me as an Outkast fan, which is why I ended up using the pattern that I used on it. There's a stutter pattern that lives in the South that I felt compelled to do.

(First verse lead vocals: "Business time, I'm on mine, I be mindin' mine / Every time on my grind, I'm just tryna shine / Make a dollar, government, they want a dozen dimes / The petty kind, might kill ya 'cause they see you shine")

Killer Mike: It's a old southern pattern, that stutter pattern, Lord Infamous did it, Project Pat does it, the Migos have mastered it 10 times over.

EI-P: And he said, he told me he was going to add ad libs. He said it, but I didn't know what he meant.

Killer Mike: It's written to be call and response-y. I wrote that for the audience because I look forward to getting back onstage, and I visualize it as I'm doing it, the crowd say, "Get money," back to me.

(First verse vocals: "Business time, I'm on mine, I be mindin' mine (Make money) / Every time on my grind, I'm just tryna shine (Stay sunny)")

EI-P: I loved when Mike added the layer of the ad libs because Mike's original verse, was none of the responses were in. So it was this very broken up sparse thing. So when he added that layer of ad libs, that's when I realized how fucking genius my partner was.

(First verse vocals: "I done had to have a talk with myself many times (For real) / Am I a hypocrite 'cause I know I did plenty crimes? (Yes, I'm is) / I get broke too many times, I might slang some dimes (Back to trappin') / You believe corporations runnin' marijuana? (How that happen?)")

EI-P: When he said, "Back to trappin'," and then he keeps going and he say, "How that happen?" You know he's saying, "I'm back because I need to make money because I have to feed myself and my family. And I'll go right the fuck back to wherever I have to go in order to make it happen."

Killer Mike: If shit got bad, to feed my wife and children, I absolutely would resort to crime, and that's what happens in any capitalistic system, you know. I'm a capitalist, right, not because I believe that capitalism is the greatest system ever. I'm a compassionate capitalist because I grew up in the capitalistic system. I've been both a benefactor from it and a victim of it, more so that not, my community a victim of it. But I've had to understand capitalism from the bottom up and had to make a way in. But money in my life has led me to some very positive things and given me the freedom to be a benefactor to my community, a philanthropist, and to speak the unadulterated truth in a room full of people because I have a good job. I sing and dance for a living. Money has also corrupted me as a child and made me a drug dealer because everyone was selling drugs, and anyone with common sense would've taken a thousand dollar bomb of crack cocaine if it was fronted to them at 13 if they knew they could make 400 bucks off of it, you know what I'm saying. I have a guilt from formerly being a drug dealer, but with that said, corporations don't feel guilt. They sell drugs.

(First verse vocals along with beat: "I get broke too many times, I might slang some dimes (Back to trappin') / You believe corporations runnin' marijuana? Ooh (How that happen) / And your country gettin' ran by a casino owner (Ooh) / Pedophiles sponsor all these fuckin' racist bastards (They do)")

(Beat continues)

EI-P: You know what we try and do as partners is we try and pick up on what we can take from what the inspiration is from our partner and use it as DNA of what we're saying, you know, he's talking about the conflict of money, and he's talking about the politics that arise out of that. So I took where he was starting and extrapolated my own sort of perspective on it, and also with a point to make. I come from New York City, so one of the biggest events, you know, psychically and literally in New York City over the past 10 years was the murder of Eric Garner, who was killed because he was trying to sell loose cigarettes. And if you come from New York City, you know that smoking a loosie is part of how you grow up. You go to the store, you give them a quarter and you get a cigarette. Sometimes people sell them to you outside. This is a normal thing. This is a small economy, but it's money. It's money-related.

(Second verse vocals: "Beep beep, Richie, this is New York City / The X on the map where the pain keep hitting / Just us ducks here sitting / Where murderous chokehold cops still earnin' a livin' / Funny how some say money don't matter / That's rich now, isn't it, get it? Comedy / Try

to sell a pack a smokes to get food / Get killed and it's not an anomaly / But hey, it's just money")

Killer Mike: I do really rap with one of my favorite rappers in the world so I'm a fortunate guy [laughter]. There are times when you hear patterns from other rappers, and you're like, "Mother fucker, if only I would've grabbed that first or heard that in the beat."

(Second verse vocals: "Man, you better duck out, get the bag and then bug out (Uh) / Try to run home, you might run your luck out / 'Cause just when your bases loaded / They'll roll a grenade in the dugout (You're out)")

Killer Mike: That line, that that "Roll a grenade in the dugout," it really was a pure, beautiful sentiment for how far evil is willing to go to make sure good doesn't prevail. Just when we got the bases loaded, just when we can get this shit right, these mother fuckers will put a grenade in the dugout and blow up the whole game.

EI-P: Sometimes you want a metaphor that almost everybody can understand simply to slip in the idea that there is a rigging of institution.

(Beat)

EI-P: Even if you get to the point where you've lined everything up correctly the way that it's supposed to be lined up, they will break the rules and kill you from the other side when you're not looking.

(Beat ends)

EI-P: Then we reached out to Zack and said, "Yeah, you got to drop on this shit." And he said, "Bet, I'm on it." To those who don't know, Zack de la Rocha is the legendary frontman for Rage Against the Machine. And he is a friend, a good friend of both mine and Mike's, and someone that I personally consider a family member. He's become sort of the unofficial third member of Run the Jewels in a sense. Zack actually recorded his verse at his home.

(Third verse vocals: "20/20, run the map / Raw, I'm uncut in my hourglass / Don't watch it spill to the bottom half / You see the piece, now run it fast / On the tarmac in a Starter jack / C4 when I run it back / Like a track star run a record lap? Nah, like when his needle catch")

EI-P: Zack demo'd it up at his house and sent it to me to say, "Okay, I'm going to, here's the demo, I'm going to come through and do the verse." And I was like, "No, you're not [laughter]. You already did the verse, it's incredible, you're not going to touch this. This sound, what you captured here, is perfect." And it was on a SM57, which is literally the standard kind of shitty stage mic that everyone uses. It was distorted and it sounded like Zack.

(Third verse vocals: "Clean look, poet pugilist / A shooter's view, a Zapruder flick / Too rude for ya rudiments / Who convinced you you could move against the crew in this? Comin' up through the fence")

Killer Mike: That motherfucker spit hot fire, I mean, shit. Zack de la Rocha, man. First of all, rock 'n' roll should be grateful that hiphop allowed them to get such an elite MC on the trade. He's the Bo Jackson of this shit essentially. He's playing two sports excellently, so you know.

EI-P: The fact that he still manages to be clear, political, clever, but also has the bounce and the funk most rappers, you know, they just can't even pull it off. That's just the fact.

(Third verse vocals: "the world our residence / How can we be the peace / When the beast gonna reach for the worst? / Tear all the flesh off the Earth / Stage set for a deafening reckoning / Quick like the pace of a verse / So I'm questioning this quest for things / As a recipe for early death threatening / But the breath in me is weaponry / For you, it's just money")

EI-P: Then we were hanging out and Pharrell came by.

(Nicholas' layered vocals)

EI-P: We played him some jams. And he was like, "This is amazing," you know. And he basically just said, "If you need me for anything, let me know," and then he disappeared like some sort of ageless elf that just fucking just flew away, you know, like a magic man, and we were just like, "Oh, my God! Like that was amazing, you know. Pharrell just said he's down to work with us." And in my mind, of course, you're fantasizing about what the fuck could that be. I mean you know, we have Mike's verse, it's grimy. We have my verse, it's grimy. We have Zack's verse, it's super grimy. Then you're trying to imagine Pharrell on here and you're like, "Well, I know that this is the guy from "Superthug" and Clipse and this is also the guy from "Happy," and this is also the guy from, you

know, these amazing, gigantic pop songs, and he's got so much range. There's no way to predict what Pharrell is going to give you. And he had it all figured out.

(Pre-chorus vocals along with beat: "Mastered economics 'cause you took yourself from squalor (Slave) / Mastered academics 'cause your grades say you a scholar (Slave) / Mastered Instagram 'cause you can instigate a follow (Shit) / Look at all these slave masters posin' on yo' dollar")

EI-P: When he came with that shit, it was mind-blowing. It was like, "Holy shit! This is, this is harder and more cutting than anything we could have asked for." It was, it really felt like he really paid attention to what Run the Jewels was and what we were saying, and he really wrote for us. And that was an honor to have someone of that level, of that talent really pay attention and really take it seriously, and he did.

Hrishikesh: The song starts with these four hits, and I was wondering if that was at all inspired by Pharrell?

EI-P: Yep. Boom, boom, boom, boom. That was my nod to Pharrell and my nod to The Neptunes. That's a signature that Pharrell incorporates in his beats all the time. He does the four count with the kick before the thing starts. So, for the music heads, it was, it was funny, and I had a lot of people being like, "So, Pharrell produced the track, right?" And I was like, "Well, no." They were like, "Oh, I thought because of the thing in the beginning." I was like, "Well, that's, Pharrell did produce the track in that regard because without Pharrell, that would not have happened, absolutely."

(4 count with the kick drum into Pharrell's pre-chorus vocals: "Master of these politics, you swear that you got options (Slave) / Master of opinion 'cause you vote with the white collar (Slave) / The Thirteenth Amendment says that slavery's abolished (Shit) / Look at all these slave masters posin' on yo' dollar")

EI-P: And he wanted Mike to do all of the, "Look at all these slave masters posin' on yo' dollar," but the thing about it is Pharrell sounds so goddamn cool, I could not bring myself to cut. I can't. I can't do it. I can't bring myself to cut him. There was something so powerful about hearing Pharrell say that because a lot of people just forget that this dude is a real, like, he's got that grimy side to him. And hearing him say that is really powerful. It's something you might expect Mike to say, but not everyone would expect Pharrell to say. So, I didn't want to

cut that out of that. And we figured out other ways to do it, you know, Mike took the back half of the hook.

(Killer Mike and Pharrell Williams chorus vocals along with drum beat: "Look at all these slave masters (Ayy) posin' on yo' dollar (Get it?) / Look at all these slave masters (Ayy) posin' on yo' dollar (Get it?) / Look at all these slave masters (Ayy) posin' on yo' dollar (Get it?)")

El-P: Then I hit up Zack and asked him to do his version of it. There's one thing that working with Zack is that when he's in rapper mode, sometimes you got to tell Zack, "Hey, I need Rage Against the Machine Zack for this one line [laughter], you know what I mean? Like I need, I need that energy for this one moment. You got to say that shit with thumbtacks and whiskey in your throat."

(Zack chorus vocals: "Look at all these slave masters")

(4 count with the kick drum into the beat and layered vocals)

El-P: The relationship and the truth between institutional violence and money, that's something that me and Mike are very aware of, and something that we examine on this album a lot, and at the end of the day, it is a control system based on those transactions.

Killer Mike: It was me dealing with my relationship with this system and money as both being a benefactor of it and being a victim of it. All that contradiction that is being an American was put into those bars.

(Beat along with layered vocals)

El-P: People try to tell you that, "Hey, money doesn't mean anything. Free yourself from money. Money doesn't matter. That's not what it's about," and that's all well and good, but until you cannot be murdered by a police officer for trying to make a little bit of money, then maybe it is what it's about.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "JU\$T," by Run the Jewels, in its entirety.

("JU\$T" by RUN THE JEWELS)

Hrishikesh: For more info on Run the Jewels, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "JU\$T," and you can watch the lyric video for it.

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