

**Song Exploder**  
**Wolf Alice - Don't Delete the Kisses**  
**Episode 137**

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.

*("Don't Delete the Kisses" by WOLF ALICE)*

Hrishikesh: Wolf Alice is a four-piece band from North London. They've been nominated for a Grammy and England's Mercury prize. Their second album, *Visions of a Life*, was released in September 2017. In this episode, singer and guitarist Ellie Rowsell and drummer Joel Amey tell the story of how they made the song "Don't Delete the Kisses." Their album was produced by Justin Meldal-Johnsen, and coming up later, you'll hear some of his thoughts, as well. "Don't Delete the Kisses" went through a lot of versions: there was a home demo that Ellie made, another demo with the full band, plus studio versions that they recorded in LA with Justin. There were a lot of ideas that were created, but then scrapped later. In this episode, they trace the path through those ideas, as well as how the song was influenced by Father John Misty, PJ Harvey, and the film *Frances Ha*. It's Wolf Alice on Song Exploder.

*("Don't Delete the Kisses" by WOLF ALICE)*

Ellie: My name is Ellie, I sing and play guitar in Wolf Alice.

Joel: My name's Joel and I play drums.

*(Music fades)*

Ellie: I think the first idea I had for this song was that I wanted something that had a rolling synth in it, something that was repetitive and didn't change, and everything else changed around it. And I think it partly came from, one year we had gone to a festival in Spain, we had watched Father John Misty. He had one song, which the synth was really prominent and that was

Joel: "True Affection."

Ellie: "True Affection."

*("True Affection" by FATHER JOHN MISTY)*

Joel: It was me, Theo, and Ellie watching in the crowd. And it's the whole package for that song I think. His performance that day, the setting, the way his band looked, they looked very, just unbelievably cool but making this very powerful, beautiful song.

*("True Affection" by FATHER JOHN MISTY)*

Ellie: And I loved that the synth never left. And everything else changed around it.

*("True Affection" by FATHER JOHN MISTY)*

*(Music fades)*

Ellie: I love that song, and it's got that feeling of excitement and romance and euphoria. It moved me and I wanted something like that.

Joel: I think it's always a telling sign of seeing a good show when you watch something and you need to get to like a guitar or a keyboard quickly to try and get how you feel out now. I definitely felt that after that performance. But Ellie just beat me to it.

Ellie: You know, I had wanted to write a love song and I had wanted to write that cinematic rolling synth song, so I just put them together. I had made a GarageBand demo, in which I just clicked on arpeggiators because I guess arpeggiators kind of do it for you.

Hrishikesh: An arpeggiator is a feature in a lot of synthesizers. If you play a chord, while the arpeggiator is on, it will automatically break up the chord into its individual notes, and then plays them back one at a time, in sequence. OK, back to Ellie.

Ellie: I had made a GarageBand demo, in which I just clicked on arpeggiators because I guess arpeggiators kind of do it for you, and just looped it.

*(Arpeggiator with drums)*

Ellie: I wrote the chorus and I was like, "Okay this is very simple but that's fine, it's a chorus." It was just, "What if it's not meant for me? Love."

*(Vocals join: "Love / What if it's not meant for me?")*

Ellie: I had one verse, and I wasn't trying to squeeze out lyrics, they were just coming. I was messing around with melodies and I think I realized I had so much to say that I wasn't going to be able to fit it in to any melody, so I kind of spoke it.

*(Vocals with arpeggiator and drums: "I'd like to get to know you / I'd like to take you out / We'd go to The Hail Mary / And afterwards make out / Instead, I'm typing you a message / That I know I'll never send / Rewriting old excuses / Delete the kisses at the end")*

Ellie: And the drum beat, again it's just on GarageBand, and it just, like, plays along for you, so it's a really lazy way of making a drum beat. But the feeling was right.

*(Music fades)*

Ellie: You know, sometimes you go into your demos, you try to really produce it and get all the fiddly bits down, but you know, this one just needed chords and lyrics, and then we would do all the rest together.

Joel: I remember hearing the demo for the first time, we played it through really bad PA speakers, and even then I was like, "Oh yeah, I understand the feeling from this demo. I think it was just one of those songs you just wanted to get into a rehearsal room, and start mucking around with straight away, and we wanted to make sure we could perform these things later on. But we didn't have any access to keyboards or anything, so instantly I was thinking, "Well how are we going to do this?"

Ellie: You don't want a GarageBand loop in there and it's cool to try and recreate it using your own sounds.

Joel: So Joff had the task of playing all the synth parts via his guitar. He's really good at making sounds with his guitar that don't sound like the guitar. And he had this new guitar pedal that sounds like an anime character, it makes your guitar sort of, it's like a filter. And he just mucked around with that. And it just sounded a bit like the [sings synth part], like the rolling synth line. So we just hit record, and everyone could play live.

*(Guitar with drums)*

Ellie: But the pedal's slightly funny. For me, the second demo, I was excited because it's cool to try and recreate it. But I always think a true test of a song is how much you listen to the demo and I

*(Music ends)*

Ellie: never listened to it. It wasn't doing it for me at all. It kind of took it to a kind of indie realm,

Joel: Yeah.

Ellie: like indie rock, but it hadn't captured a feeling. It wasn't right.

*(Guitar with drums)*

Justin: I'm Justin Meldal-Johnsen, producer and musician.

Joel: When Justin came over for the pre-production, and he was hearing us play it,

Justin: I had the band demo, I was like, "This is cool."

Joel: but you kind of hear, it wasn't necessarily clicking with him.

Justin: The guitar motif, I got a sense that that was just not going to fly. There was something about it, I think the band felt was too saccharine.

Ellie: It was supposed to be more kind of cinematic or dance-y.

Joel: We were like, "Have you heard the original demo?" He was like, "No." So we played him the original demo and it was just like [snaps fingers], "Ah."

*(Arpeggiator with drums)*

Justin: There was something about it that was just like, "Wow, that's the launching point, that's where we need to begin."

*(Music fades)*

Joel: I think the first thing to get back to the original demo was probably to strip away a lot of what we'd put in. Not to like bin those ideas, but just to remember the

starting point. So for the drum part, I was really hoping it would be all digital or processed at one point. In my head I was like, “Ah, I just want to have it like as a dance track, like samples.” But Justin was a big believer in, you should try and blend an organic element in. So we did the drums in EastWest Studios, and whatever kit we had set up for another song, at the end of it, we’d get a sample and the pattern that we’d potentially use for “Don’t Delete the Kisses.” So we had like all these sample banks built up, and we went through and we ended up finding the nicest sounding kick that would fit.

*(Drums)*

Joel: The nicest sounding snare.

*(Drums)*

Joel: And we just built the drums into the track like that.

*(Drums)*

Joel: And he’s right, you know, it adds room and like it’s more solid. Everything became like the same hit, but with the feel of someone playing it.

*(Drums)*

*(Drums end)*

Justin: Ellie’s demo, one of the most important things it has going for it, is this arpeggio.

Joel: So we then went on quite a long quest to recreate the rolling synth line from GarageBand.

Ellie: Justin had loads of synths that had arpeggiators. I remember actually coming in and seeing him in Studio B, which was like a shed, and he was surrounded by synths. He looked like Doctor Who in TARDIS like some kind of wizard [laughter].

*(Synth)*

Ellie: Lights flashing everywhere, and making all these arpeggiators, you know, speaking the language that I didn’t speak.

Joel: Yeah. And Justin had an old LinnDrum, one of the very first drum machines, like an actual old one. And it had like all the original sounds. So we had one of those set up in the B studio, and yeah, I think me and you just started piecing things together from the ground up.

*(Synth with beat)*

Joel: That was the one we called the EDM version. We all got kind of excited, and we were comparing it to like an emotion of when you're like at a music festival, and you can hear the band you're waiting to hear, it's like they're playing a song you love, but it's in the distance, and you have to like run towards it. We had that emotion at one point.

*(Vocals join: "What if it's not meant for me? / Love")*

Ellie: For whatever reason, Joff wasn't there. And me, Theo and Joel were bouncing off the walls and we dancing, we were hugging, you know, it was a really embarrassing cheesy moment if anyone had seen it, they would've cringed. And then Joff came in [laughter] the next day, and was like, "No."

*(Music ends)*

Joel: "No." He just came back and was like, "This is quite bad." [laughter]

Ellie: [laughter]

Joel: And we had to start again [laughter].

Ellie: [laughter]

Joel: The only problem we found with Studio B, was everyone would go like, *very* deep into "Don't Delete the Kisses" themselves, and come out like, "Listen to this," and then we'd be like, "Nah [laughter]," like, "Damn [laughter]!"

Ellie: And you hear it with fresh ears and you're like, "Oh god, no, we've still not got it." It was almost like the arpeggiator was too good. It didn't sound like us [laughter]. So eventually we just found a really nice sound and just played the arpeggiator ourselves, you know, like literally going [sings arpeggios] like with our fingers really fast.

*(Synth)*

*(Drums join)*

*(Music fades)*

Joel: Then we did the conga sound.

*(Conga)*

Joel: And that was actually one of Ellie's ideas.

Ellie: I stole it from PJ Harvey [laughter]. You know, not stolen but inspired by.

*("All and Everyone" by PJ HARVEY)*

Ellie: She has this song in *Let England Shake*, which is one of my favorite albums.

*("All and Everyone" by PJ HARVEY)*

Ellie: The drum beat is like [sings drum part].

*("All and Everyone" by PJ HARVEY)*

*(Music fades)*

Ellie: I find it quite strange if a drum beat gets in your head, you know? And that drum beat's always in my head. I just really wanted to use [laughter] it at some point.

*(Conga with drums)*

*(Music fades)*

Ellie: I then had a loop of just white noise which I just made by mistake.

*(White noise)*

Ellie: That's from the original demo. I think I had plugged in my guitar to make a guitar line over the top. Didn't work, and I guess all the feedback made that noise, which then I just looped.

*(White noise)*

Ellie: It fills a hole and makes it give the effect of perhaps like fuzz or distortion, but without shrouding your part. We actually used the white noise from that demo in the real song. Some things you can't really recreate.

*(White noise fades)*

Joel: Then we just let Joff let rip in Studio B. He literally went over there for a few hours and came back with these sounds.

*(Guitar)*

Ellie: That's Joff's guitar. Yeah.

Joel: Yeah. We were calling it the seagulls because it sounds like, well, seagulls [laughter].

Ellie: [laughter]

Joel: He's really good at again like, it's a guitar but it's not a guitar. That actually is one of my favorite bits of the whole album. I'm kind of having like goosebumps moment, because it just bounced off the existing chords.

*(Guitar)*

Joel: And just became very like orchestral. You know, when you're trying to think like, "What is it that's missing, what other synth can we put in?" And he just came back, I was like "Oh, it's done now [laughter]. There we go [laughter], he's cracked it."

*(Music ends)*

Ellie: This is song about me being 25. I'm a true believer that teenage thoughts and feelings are not exclusive to teenagers [laughter], especially when it comes to romance. That feeling of crushing on someone is not exclusive to teenagers. And it's a great feeling [laughter]. But then the verses, I was really scared about doing, because for me it's quite close to being quite cringey, you know. The sopiness of the lyrics, you know. So I was nervous about doing it.



*(Vocals: "I'd like to get to know you / I'd like to take you out / We'd go to The Hail Mary / And afterwards make out / Instead, I'm typing you a message / That I know I'll never send / Rewriting old excuses / Delete the kisses at the end")*

Ellie: People don't really like to listen to their talking voice, do they? Regardless if you're a singer or not. Lyrically, it is quite self-conscious, so you kind of want to mirror that in the way the vocals are recorded. And then, you know, there's a fine line of being so shy that you hide your voice in effects, so didn't want to do that because it's such a lyrically heavy song. But we did put something on it. The romantic side of me again, it's quite nice to imagine it was a phone call.

*(Vocals: "When I see you, the whole world reduces / To just that room")*

Ellie: The line, "When I see you, the whole world reduces to just that room." I had watched that film *Frances Ha*, and that's something she says.

*(Frances Ha movie audio clip: "It's that thing, when you're with someone and you love them, and they know it, and they love you, and you know it, but it's a party. And you're both talking to other people, and you're laughing and shining, and you look across the room and catch each other's eyes. But, but not because you're possessive or it's precisely sexual [sigh], but because that is your person in this life")*

Ellie: It was one of my favorite scenes in a movie, it really struck a chord with me. And so, I stole it [laughter].

*(Vocals: "When I see you, the whole world reduces / To just that room / And then I remember and I'm shy / That gossip's eye will look too soon / And then I'm trapped, overthinking / And yeah")*

Justin: If you have a monologue spoken word situation like this, you have to commit to it wholesale. You can't be embarrassed about it, you can't self-edit too much, you know, it has to be real. And that requires a very specific frame of mind to get into. There's this moment that she has in the second verse at the end of the verse.

*(Vocals: "And now I'm home, a little bit drunk / Some things don't change / And I know now")*

Justin: I'm amazed at how she delivered that, and I remember looking at the lyric sheet and then looking back and forth to her as she was singing it on the microphone,

and I knew that we had the song. And then immediately is followed by this massive exultant chorus.

Ellie: And that's when I then changed the last chorus to be an optimistic one. From "What if it's not meant for me?" to "You and me were meant to be."

*(Vocals: "Me and you were meant to be / In love")*

Ellie: So it wouldn't have been nice to have ended it on a sad question. Then it probably wouldn't have been a love song, you know.

*(Synth pad)*

Justin: "Don't Delete the Kisses" went through many iterations.

Joel: Three months, we was kind of spent in Los Angeles working on *Visions of a Life*, and I think that time benefited this song the most because it went through so many different versions, and really had to get to where it ended up. And it took a while.

Ellie: But it was just this important process, you know, to figure out what we wanted from this song. This whole song is about, you know, letting go to love and it's a diary entry for me, so it's nice to look back on and remember how I once felt and what was once going on.

*(Synth joins)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Don't Delete the Kisses," by Wolf Alice, in its entirety.

*("Don't Delete the Kisses" by WOLF ALICE)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Wolf Alice, and for a link to buy or stream this song.

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