Song Exploder
Omah Lay - Never Forget
Episode 244

Hrishikesh: Just a heads up that this episode contains explicit language, including discussion of a lyric that contains the n-word.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

Omah Lay is a Nigerian singer, songwriter, and producer. He's one of the young stars of Afrobeats, the West African genre that's become a global phenomenon. His new album *Boy Alone* has had multiple hits, including a collaboration with Justin Bieber. And for this episode, Omah talked to me about the song "Never Forget." Boy Alone was his late father's nickname, and the song "Never Forget" was inspired by him.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

(Vocals: "I will never forget / I'll never forget (gen-gen, gen-gen) / I'll never forget you / I'll never forget (gen-gen, gen-gen) / I'll never forget you / I'll never forget...")

Omah: My name is Stanley Omah Didia, and I'm also known as Omah Lay.

My father's name was Boy Alone.

My father is that guy who came out from a very, very poor family, and left the village and left his friends and went to the city all by himself, and found his way, found my mom, and settled down.

He was one of the first persons that ever did that in his circle. So people started calling him Boy Alone cuz like, yeah, he did everything by himself. No matter what anybody says, he would do it alone.

So much of the reasons why people called him Boy Alone, I had so much of that in me.

I came from a very, very, very poor family. And all by myself, I got to where I am today.

It's been, like, 13 years now since my father passed. But I've always known that, like, I wanted to make a song for my late father. So, I don't know if it was the right time. But yeah, I miss my dad.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

Semzi is the producer behind "Never Forget." He made the beat.

Semzi: My name is Semzi, and I'm a music producer from Nigeria.

Omah: He's one of the best music producers that I've ever worked with. So I was working, I was in the studio that night, and he played the beat for me.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

beat

Semzi: I made that beat sometime in 2019. I started with the drums.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

drums only

Then the pads.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

pads

pads + drums

Semzi: So from there, I went to my bassline, cuz I'm really particular about my bass.

Yeah, I wanted this Afro Groovy bass. Like something is coming, be scared. You don't have any idea of what's coming next.

bass and drums

Semzi: I sent this beat to a couple of people and they didn't send me songs back.

Omah: Like nobody was like, feeling the beat like that, but I was hearing something different. Like, he just played it and he wanted to move to the next beat. And then I was like no, no way.

Semzi: I knew it was special, so I just wanted it for the right person.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

pads

When I heard the beat for the first time, there was this thing that it gave me. It felt like there's this feeling I've had for so long, and somebody just gave me a platform to express it.

I took a pen and my notepad to write. I just started writing about my dad, and everybody that I've lost.

The first line that I wrote was, I will never forget you.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

(Vocals: "I will never forget / I'll never forget (gen-gen, gen-gen) / I'll never forget you / I'll never forget (gen-gen, gen-gen) / I'll never forget you / I'll never forget, oh…")

Losing a lot of my friends while growing up...

I wanted to make a song for soldiers who died at war. I wanted to make a song for the people who died at the EndSARS protests in 2020. EndSARS is a movement in Nigeria that's against police brutality.

And in 2020, the protests got really serious and thousands of people came out marching against police brutality. And a lot of people lost their lives.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

You know, being a boy in a very tough environment, we never cry. Like, I can't remember the last time I cried.

Not even when I lost my dad. Because like, I'm always around my guys and stuff. I guess all that stuff kind of like, have stayed inside me for the longest – from like, since I was like 12 or something, and being in the street and being so hard on myself and stuff like that.

And I said, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do without you."

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

(Vocals: "I don't know what to do / I don't know what to do (do-do-do) / Oh, I don't know what to do / I don't know what to (do-do-do) / Oh, I don't know what to do without you / I don't know what to do without you")

And then, the second line that I wrote was, I have been n****ring, like the word n****r.

"I've been n****ring." It simply means that I've been in the streets. I've been hustling.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

*(Vocals: "I've been vigilant / I've been intelligent / Nobody get rank for this military / Everybody will die / Die like ant and rot like Millipedes / I've been n****ring")*

Like, I have been so hard. I've been in the streets. I have been through it all. Like, I've been hustling. I've been doing everything that a young black boy could do to survive.

One thing with the whole song is that it's not just me.

Everything that I said in the verses about myself and my hustles and my struggle, those are the same thing my dad went through when he was a boy.

Cuz this is the life of every normal black kid in the whole world.

And not just black kids, every kid, probably, who doesn't come from like a very wealthy family or something like that.

Yeah, it could be sad to anybody, but to me it's reality. It's just me telling you my story, and probably still telling the story of million and one people, kids out there who's probably going through the same thing.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

(Vocals: "From the slums I come / Oh, marine base boy / I know love is war / I know God is God / I will never stop / 'Til the war is won / Tell the kids unborn / And the ones we lost / I will never forget")

I know love is war. I know God is God. I will never stop until the war is won. Tell the kids unborn and the ones we lost, that I will never forget.

Working on my album, working on *Boy Alone*, I was really, really depressed. I was so unhappy with life and everything. I had three different therapists.

And the only person who I could actually tell my problem, was the microphone.

The microphone was like my best friend. As soon as I turned it on, it was like a relief. And I'm just writing. I'm just putting melodies to my thoughts and saying everything. That made me feel a lot better.

Yeah, and then after that I sent it back to Semzi, and he started reconstructing it and adding some stuffs and adding some elements where they were needed

Semzi: Yeah. I did some post productions. That's when I had that one bell sound.

(sings w/ glockenspiel in BG) "dun, dun dun - dun, dun, dun"

(Vocals: "Boy Alone Lay, oh / Boy Alone Lay / Boy Alone Lay, oh / Boy Alone Lay / Gbashi nim ere ngwa ngwa / Gbashi nim ere Kwai Kwai")

chorus with horns

So the vocals gave me inspiration for that. additional instruments for me to finish the beat

chorus

(Vocals: "Boy Alone Lay, oh / Boy Alone Lay / Boy Alone Lay, oh / Boy Alone Lay / Gbashi nim ere ngwa ngwa / Gbashi nim ere Kwai Kwai / If you're hearing my voice, I want you to know")

"Gbashi nim ere ngwa ngwa. Gbashi nim ere Kwai Kwai." *(chuckles)* That's my native dialect.

I'm calling out to anybody who's out there who can hear my voice right now; who feel like they're a boy alone; who feel like I'm telling their story, who feel like they've lost somebody. If you can hear my voice right now, just dance.

Forget about everything. Forget about all the struggle and just dance.

At the same time, I'm talking to my dad, his spirit or whatever. If he can hear my voice right now, wherever he is, let him dance. I don't care if he's in hell, if he's in heaven. *(chuckles)* But if you're out there, and you can hear my voice, dance.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

chorus

That is a very, very local thing to do. Like, that stuff is something that they used to do in the records in the nineties, before I was born. We have this music called Highlife.

And I heard my father, my dad, play a bunch of records when I was young with that thing. It just felt like since I was speaking in my native dialect, it just felt so much more like to add something from, from way back.

So yeah, I added that stuff. I don't even know what it's called. It's just me doing a kind of spiritual, I guess.

"Never Forget" was, was not supposed to make the album. I recorded and I sent it to my team. Everybody was like, uhh, I don't know what happened, but nobody was like really feeling it.

My team was kind of like, the beat was up tempo for, for sad lyrics. Some people was not feeling the chorus. They said it was too personalized. That was it.

I kind of lost hope on the song cuz everybody was like, I kind of feel like I was the only one who was feeling this. So I just put the song in a vault .And then with time, it took three months, four months, and the thing with the song was, every time that I came back to this song, it feels new.

And then, I felt way more confident, and I added the song to the album, and it made more sense.

Yeah, I just wanted to make a song for the people that we've lost. And I'm so grateful, I'm so happy that I did it like "Never Forget."

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Never Forget," by Omah Lay, in its entirety.

("Never Forget" by OMAH LAY)

For more, visit songexploder.net. You can find links to buy or stream "Never Forget."

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were created by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Mary Dolan.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.