

Song Exploder
Seal - "Kiss from a Rose"
Episode 250

HH: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and, piece by piece, tell the story of how they were made.

music in

("Ba-ya-ya, ba-da-da-da-da-da, ba-ya-ya")

HH: Seal is a Grammy-winning singer and songwriter from England. His song "Kiss from a Rose" was first released in 1994, on his second album. It was a huge hit, thanks in part to being featured in the movie Batman Forever. It landed on the top ten charts in multiple countries, and eventually went quadruple platinum in the US. And at the 1996 Grammys, it won Song of the Year, Record of the Year, and Best Male Pop Vocal Performance.

But "Kiss from a Rose" becoming a hit wasn't a foregone conclusion. Seal almost didn't record it. And when it was first released, it didn't make much of a splash. But for this episode, the 250th episode of Song Exploder, Seal and his longtime collaborator, producer Trevor Horn, told me the story of what it took to bring "Kiss from a Rose" to life.

music up

("Baby, I compare you to a kiss from a rose on the grey / Ooh, the more I get of you, stranger it feels, yeah / And now that your rose is in bloom / A light hits the gloom on the grey")

S: My name is Seal and I'm a recording artist.

I wrote "Kiss From A Rose" around, it would've been '87, '86, '87.

I was living in a squat. I didn't have any money and I was just basically getting my act together, trying to figure out who I was musically.

And "Kiss From A Rose" came out of that period, when you sort of do things not for any other purpose than because that's what's coming out of you. I had no experience in the studio, in a proper recording studio, at that point.

And so, I didn't know the rules.

And it started out as a bit of an experiment, because I'd just got this piece of recording apparatus called a 4-Track.

And I was trying to figure out how to use it. I couldn't play an instrument at the time.

But I tried to imagine what an orchestra would do, and, and came up with these parts.

hums instrumental riff from intro

("Ba-ya-ya, ba-da-da-da-da-da, ba-ya-ya")

And,

("ba da daa, (ba ba) / (ba ba) / (ba badada) ")

So I was essentially trying to mimic a flute, pizzicato violins and a few other instruments. Essentially an orchestra. And so, I ended up recording about 16 or 17 tracks of vocals, trying to figure out how to work this machine.

And everything was impulsive and instinctive.

And at the end of the day doing it, I had this thing called "Kiss From A Rose."

I, I remember kind of listening to the tape, and I kind of tossed the tape to one side, because I wasn't particularly proud of it.

intro clip

("Ba-ya-ya, ba-da-da-da-da-da, ba-ya-ya")

JILL / TREVOR / ZTT

Later on, we'd had some success with a song called "Killer" that was quite popular.

HH: Killer is a song by the English DJ Adamski, that featured Seal on guest vocals. It came out in 1990 and was a number one hit in the UK.

S: And so I'd been to see a few different record companies. I remember walking into ZTT records.

And as I was walking through the corridors, I was looking at all of the, the plaques on the wall.

And there were bands like Propaganda, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Grace Jones' Slave to the Rhythm.

And I remember looking at all of these records and going, oh, I like that record! Oh yeah, I really like that record! Oh! And it was only then that I made the connection that Trevor Horn had produced all of these.

T: Hi, my name's Trevor Horn and I'm an old record producer.

My late wife was Jill Sinclair. At the time, Jill and I were kind of like a, a team. Jill was my wife, but she was also my manager. And we started a record label together, which was ZTT.

Before I actually met Seal, she said, I've found him.

Seal: (chuckles)

I've found what I've been looking for.

S: I remember the first meeting very clearly as if it were yesterday,

Jill looked at me and she said - I'll never forget this - she said, right, young man, let me tell you why this is your home.

Trevor: (chuckles)

And I walked out of there and I remember telling my manager at the time that that's where I wanted to be.

PRODUCTION

And so, Trevor and I eventually got together, and my life changed.

I remember this friend of mine would always tell Trevor, he said, you know, Seal's got this Rose song, you should get him to play it to you.

And Trevor would keep saying to me, "What, what's this song that Paul keeps going on about, this Rose song?" And I'd be like, "Ah, no, no, don't worry about it." You know, and I just passed it off as being nothing.

T: You said it was sort of Elizabethan.

S: Yeah. That was it.

T: And I remember being quite intrigued, but we never got round to it on the first record. And then when we got to the second record, and I remember saying to you, here, what about that Elizabethan thing?

Harpichord opening

HH: And what did you think, when he first showed it to you?

T: I loved it. You're kidding. I thought, I thought it's so rare you hear something that's in 3/4 you know, or 6/8, whichever time signature. I loved the, yeah the (vocalizes) ba da da, da da da da, I mean, what's not to love about that?

S: We recorded at Sarm Studio, Sarm West, in London.

T: I didn't quite know how to do the song. But then I thought probably the best thing is to keep it straight, rather than trying to get clever with any techno stuff on it.

Guitar stem

We had a seven-piece band.

Chris Bruce played guitar,

Jamie Muhoberac played keyboards.

piano stem

A guy called Amp Fiddler also played keyboards initially.

wurli stem

We had Harvey Mason on drums.

drums stem

An English guy on bass called Charley Drayton.

bass stem

It has these amazing dynamic bits in it

full band

where the band would get loud and then stop.

And that's one of the things you get from playing it sort of live and, and feeling it.

VOCALS

("There is so much a man can tell you / So much he can say / You remain my power, my pleasure, my pain")

S: I liked singing with the band, but I really liked the focus sessions that Trevor and I used to have in the studio, cuz that's where I learned my trade, really.

lead vocal

("Baby, I compare you to a kiss from a rose on the grey / Ooh, the more I get of you, stranger it feels, yeah / And now that your rose is in bloom / A light hits the gloom on the grey")

At one point I used to live literally across the road, in Trevor's basement flat, and I would walk into the studio at sometimes three o'clock in the morning, sometimes, you know, one o'clock in the afternoon, at, at all these different times.

And there was always a mic ready, there was always a setup ready. There was always an engineer available, whether Trevor was there or not.

Because Trevor once told me, look, everything else I can control, and I can make it work. You know, whether it's orchestras, whether it's other musicians.

The one thing I can't control is your vocal.

more lead vocal

("But did you know that when it snows / My eyes become large and / The light that you shine can't be seen?")

T: Sometimes you were with friends, very nice friends. And I would, I would say to you, hey, Seal, why don't you do a vocal.

S: And I'd sing better. Trevor's being tactful. I'd generally walk in with like, some gorgeous, gorgeous lady. And, Trevor understood, you know, if I had an audience to perform in front of, I sang differently.

T: Yep.

S: So he encouraged me to get the vocal.

Because it's a tricky song, "Kiss From A Rose." It's not for the faint at heart.

In the verses, it's low and exposed. And it's harder to sing the low parts when you're nervous than it is the high parts.

verse 2b vox

*"(*Baby / To me, you're like a growing addiction that I can't deny / Won't you tell me, is that healthy, baby?)"**

T: I don't recollect you having any problem singing it. But, we put in a little 3/8 bar to give you a breath, after one line.

S: Because it used to go, (sings) "There used to be a greying tower alone on the sea / (no pause) You-ou remain" It used to go like that.

But then, Trevor put in a little turnaround that would give me time to catch my breath.

v1 lead vocal

("There used to be a greying tower alone on the sea / You became the light on the dark side of me")

That little thing is so important to the overall performance.

BRIDGE

("Love remained a drug that's the high and not the pill / But did you know that when it snows / My eyes become large and / The light that you shine can't be seen?)"

Trevor used to stress the importance of a middle eight.

T: You started going, "I've been kissed from a rose."

bridge lead vocal

("I've been kissed by a rose on the grey")

What I suggest, I said, you can make that a middle eight, we'd take it down a tone and then we'll go back up again for the end of the song.

And it worked great.

bridge lead vocal (2nd line) into BVs, then add violins

("I've been kissed by a rose on the grey / I, I've been kissed by a rose on the grey / I've (And if I should fall, will it all go away?) been kissed by a rose on the grey / I, I've been kissed by a rose on the grey")

ORCHESTRATION

S: Trevor was always big on orchestras.

T: Yeah, I liked orchestras.

And Betsy Cook, was a really great writer, and she came in when we were working on "Kiss from a Rose." And she's a great keyboard player. And she went, God, I love this song. And then she left. And then she came running back five minutes later and said, I've got an idea for a string part on this. Can I show you what it is?

I had a, you know, I had a keyboard there. And she was playing MIDI strings, and I just recorded the MIDI strings into a computer.

And then when we got the strings - I think there's only 30 strings. It's not like a 60 piece orchestra, but they're all the best players.

more orchestra plus vocals

("I've been kissed by a rose on the grey / I, I've been kissed by a rose")

S: When you have an orchestra that can do that - move organically - god, that is a very, very unique type of luxury for a singer.

orchestra plus vocals

("There is so much a man can tell you / So much he can say / You remain my power, my pleasure, my pain")

T: Seal's always liked the French horn.

french horn

It's a beautiful instrument. Oboe's a beautiful instrument too.

oboe

BGVs

S: Trevor used to get me to sing each part, the harmonies, eight times.

And in those days we didn't, you know, there was no auto tune. So Trevor got me to sing that harmony in terms of tightness and pitch.

He would get me to sing it 8 times until I got one that was passable, right?

And he'd go, okay, great. Now track to that.

backing vocals

("I've been kissed from a rose on the grey / Ooh, the stranger it feels, yeah")

T: You don't meet many people who can knock off harmonies who've got two octaves, And can sing soft and hard and can remember how they phrased something. One, you know, it, it does take a certain talent to do it.

And Seal was just really good at it.

S: And you know, the payoff is when you come into the studio and you split them left to right and you put them all up together and then you just hear this beautiful, lush sound.

"now that your rose is in bloom..."

("Now that your rose is in bloom / A light hits the gloom on the grey / Ba-ya-ya, ba-da-da-da-da-da, ba-ya-ya / Ba-ya-ya, ba-da-da-da-da-da, ba-ya-ya")

BATMAN

S: "Kiss From A Rose" was the fourth single released from the second album.

T: It didn't easily slot into any genre.

S: It went in the charts around 60, dropped to 80-something the next week, and it was out. DJs barely played it. No one really understood it, I guess. And no one heard it.

T: But what happened was, Seal started to be managed by a guy called Bob Cavallo. And Bob was really good friends with Joel Schumacher, who had just directed the Batman movie.

S: Joel Schumacher, God bless him, it didn't fit in the love scene that he was trying to put the song in, but he loved the song so much, he just stuck it on the end credits.

And so, when people went to go and see the movie, the last thing they heard when they were leaving a theater was (sings) "Baby!"

baby!

And then Joel got me down to the studio lot where they'd shot a lot of the movie, and stuck me in front of the bat light. And he intercut it with scenes from the movie.

And so once we got our foot in the door with this juggernaut of a movie, and this great video on MTV, then it had the legs, then it had the staying power.

T: That was what was so funny about it in the end because, in the end, when we got the Grammy for single of the year, it had been played on every kind of station.

S: It was always a great record. The only difference is that people got to hear it.

You know, there's a lot of luck involved. One could argue that you create that luck, but whatever. Nonetheless, you do need that windfall. You do need that bit of luck. And Joel Schumacher and Bob Cavallo, had the foresight to find a way to get that song heard.

OUTRO

I was broke. I was struggling to be heard.

But then, when I met Trevor, I found the one guy who not only heard me, but knew exactly what to do with my voice.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of finding that one person who sees you and hears you, and who gets you.

score

I think it's a good song, but I think it's a great record. And that's not to do with me, that's to do with Trevor and the people that put that record together.

As an artist and producer. If you are lucky, you get one life-defining song in your career.

If you're lucky, you get one.

And "Kiss From A Rose" was mine.

HH: And now, here's "Kiss from a Rose," by Seal, in its entirety.

full song

HH: For more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Kiss from a Rose," and you can watch the music video that features Seal singing in front of the Bat signal.

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.