

**Song Exploder**  
**Local Natives - Dark Days**  
**Episode 257**

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

It can be hard to be in a band, or really, in any group where there's creative collaboration, and you're supposed to act like it's a democracy. Because what do you do with an idea that you love, if nobody else believes in it? That question is a big part of this episode with Local Natives.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - instrumental, guitar riff)*

Local Natives is a band from Southern California. Their first album came out in 2009, but the three vocalists and songwriters in the band: Taylor Rice, Kelcey Ayer, and Ryan Hahn – they've been playing together since they were in high school. The lineup also includes Matthew Frazier on drums and Nik Ewing on bass. They've put out 5 albums, including their most recent, *Time Will Wait For No One*, which came out in July 2023.

But for this episode, I talked to Taylor, Kelcey, and Ryan about an older song of theirs: "Dark Days," which came out in 2016. It's their biggest song to date; it has over 100 million streams, and it's been certified gold. It's a duet with Swedish singer Nina Persson, who was in the band The Cardigans. In 2020, they put out a new version of the song, featuring Amelia Meath from the band Sylvan Esso.

I talked to the guys here in the studio, and to Amelia Meath remotely. And together, they told me the seven-year story of how "Dark Days" was first made, and then eventually remade.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "Ooh, it goes hand in hand / With fear for the afterlife / Ooh, how can we fight it / Fight it, if we don't even know why?")*

Taylor: My name is Taylor Rice, and I sing and play guitar.

Kelcey: My name's Kelcey Ayer, and I sing and play the keys.

Ryan: My name is Ryan Hahn and I sing and play guitar.

For me to write, I need a lot of, like, alone time, and I hadn't had a lot of that for a long time. Our band had been on this kind of crazy whirlwind for the past few

years. We'd put out our second record and basically toured 11 months outta the year in 2013.

And, you know, that record was also pretty heavy. Kelcey's mom had passed away. The songs, there was a lot of sadness. I think the shows felt the same way. And so, combined, like all this insane touring and the physical exhaustion, I think there was a, a sense of like, kind of mental and emotional fatigue as well. That's kind of the head space I was in, I think, leading up to working on "Dark Days."

Our booking agent Jackie, asked if I wanted to just housesit for her, cuz I was just couch surfing at the time. So suddenly I was living in this big house in Silver Lake by myself. You know, I would just make coffee, and sit out on the balcony, and play guitar. And I remember, you know, I was so down, and yet suddenly I felt excited to write.

So many of our songs tend to start from this kind of small point, and then grow to this, like, epic crescendo. And so I think, for whatever reason, maybe a reaction to what we'd done before or just, like, wanting to feel something different. I was like, I want a song that just kind of grooves. And I think I wanted something simple. But in order to do that, I almost had to go against my instincts. And so I kind of made this, like, small writing experiment for myself. I was just gonna, like, put on a drum machine. Just start with a bassline. No chords.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - demo, bass)*

So I was just like, outside. You can hear the birds and everything.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - demo, bass cont'd)*

Around that time I was listening to uh, Talking Heads' "This Must Be The Place," and Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams." And both those songs are just incredible songs, but, you know, they're very simple, and just kind of this great bass loop while everything else, like, ebbs and flows around it.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - demo, bass cont'd)*

And so I was like, all right, I'm just gonna basically freestyle and see what comes from there.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - early voice memo)*

*(Vocals: "(Gibberish lyrics)")*

Taylor: I have never heard this.

Kelcey: I have never heard this either.

Ryan: You never expect, yeah, a lot of people to hear these voice memos, so you're like, like, I'm free to just like, spout gibberish. But uh, here we are.

The first thing that makes sense in English is "Dark Days."

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - early voice memo)*

*(Vocals: "Dark days, filled with nothing / (gibberish lyrics)")*

Taylor: I love hearing this, because I and Kelcey will send songs in this gibberish state to each other pretty freely, but Ryan will not, and I think that's why we've never heard it; Ryan likes to wait until his idea's, like, really fully formed and whatever, before he presents it.

Ryan: If I'm, like, really honest, I think at the time it kind of stemmed also from an insecurity. I didn't feel as confident in my voice just to sit down and kind of show someone a song.

And I think over the course of touring, I'd started picking up production, and really enjoying that part of it. And so, instead of just kind of feeling like hyper-vulnerable, you know, these voice memos, I can present a more realized vision.

And so I went inside and just basically opened up Ableton and started making a demo.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - early demo)*

Kelcey: Each of us have a different way that we communicate our music. So Ryan is always more production-first. I try to write words really quickly. But then Taylor, he's extremely melody-focused.

And we're not always doing it this way, but now that we've been writing together for almost 20 years, that's been how it's kind of come about.

Ryan: About a month later, I sat down to work on the demo again in Ableton, and I pulled up the first voice memo, and you can hear this random car horn.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - early voice memo)*

And it's beeping on this really cool rhythm. And I was like, that sounds like a synth. And so that's what inspired the synth in, in the song.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - demo synth)*

That definitely felt like the thing it needed to kind of push it forward.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - demo drums, synth)*

Something about that, the juxtaposition of the bass with that synth,

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - add demo bass)*

just felt like something new and kind of exciting.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES - add demo guitars)*

I can't remember when I first shared it with the guys. What I do remember, though, is that it didn't really get a big reaction.

Taylor: Yeah, Ryan's right, I think cuz it's the first time that we ever had something that's a groove that goes the entire time. I remember liking the song, but I was like, where's the epic outro? You know? And I was a little bit baffled by it.

Ryan: There's nothing scarier, yeah, than like, showing somebody something that you're really excited about and then having them be like yeah, cool man, that's, that's, that's all right. You know, and you're like, oh, I thought it was amazing. Okay.

Taylor: You know, it can be a tough environment putting the songs out there, and like, politicking and trying to get people on board. So I just think Ryan gets so much credit for persevering.

Ryan: We rented an AirBnb, just for a few days, in Joshua Tree, in July of 2015. And I specifically remember being like, all right, it's go time. I'm finishing the lyrics. And the phrase "Dark Days" was gonna be my North Star. I'm gonna like, build a song around that phrase. I don't know what it means, but I'm gonna figure it out. Like how could dark days maybe be, like, some kind of good thing?

It brought to mind growing up in Southern California and how, like, stormy, like, cloudy, dark days were kind of a rarity. And so in that way, they felt kind of special. And that made me think of you know, this time in high school with friends, jumping in someone's pool while it was raining.

That memory just kind of kicked off this like series of other kind of ideas about that time in your life. You know, first loves; first sexual experiences; getting your first car, sneaking out to your girlfriend's house and then you're racing home...

It also brought up, well, me and a couple of the guys grew up Christian. And so I think there's also like, you know, a healthy dose of, like, religious guilt that you feel doing those things, and feeling like these sins you've committed are somehow like the seventh sign of the apocalypse.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "Can't wait, holy other / Might as well be the seventh sign")*

And it's like kind of starting to question faith Trying to feel less burdened by shame. Feeling more free.

*(Vocals: "Ooh, it goes hand in hand / With fear for the afterlife")*

Ryan: So those are my original scratch vocals for the demo.

*(Vocals: "Ooh, how can we fight it / Fight it if we don't even know why?")*

Kelcey: Historically, in our band, Taylor, Ry, and myself, we write the songs.

Ryan: And Kelcey will sing the songs that he brings to the table, and same with Taylor, he'll sing the songs that he writes.

Kelcey: And then, between the three of us, we'll figure out who will sing the song that Ryan writes. But for "Dark Days," I just wanted to try to sing something in a lower register. And I tried my hand singing the song.

*(Vocals: "Can't wait / Holy other")*

Ryan: These are Kelcey's vocals for the finished version of the song.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "Might as well be the seventh sign / Ooh, it goes hand in hand / With fear for the afterlife")*

Poor Kelcey had to deal with me when it came time to singing the song. I was just coaching him to, like, an insane degree, where I think he really didn't like me that day.

I just kept asking him to sing it softer and softer and softer, because I wanted it to reflect the feeling that I had from the demo.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - lead vocals)*

*(Vocals: “Finally what you came for / Finally what you hoped to find” )*

Kelcey: It is hard to thread the needle for what's in somebody's head. It's definitely not my first instinct, to sing very softly.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - all vocals)*

*(Vocals: “Racing home from her house / Looking out for black and white / Dark days, in the summer / (Dark days, summer) / (Can't wait, other)” )*

Ryan: We don't usually do background vocals in the classic sense of just doing pads, but we thought we would just try something different. And so, yeah, that's me and Taylor.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - background vocals)*

*(Vocals: “Ooh, it goes hand in hand / With fear for the afterlife” )*

Taylor: One of the most fun parts is when we do vocal harmonies. The three of us have been singing together since we were 15.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - chorus harmonies)*

*(Vocals: “Ooh, how can we fight it / Fight it if we don't even know why?” )*

Ryan: By that point, obviously I'd had the song for so long and I think I was, like, holding onto it tightly. I was like “I don't want anyone to mess with it.”

I still even wanted the drum machine from my demo, and it was like, well, how about we try to recreate something that sounds like a drum machine?

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - drums)*

Taylor: I think we crammed into a closet, and had so many blankets up everywhere to create the deadest sound possible.

Ryan: And then, uh, I think another piece of the puzzle, too, was again trying to get everyone on board with this song. Maybe it was a bit of politicking, but I was like, *You know what'd be cool, is if we had a duet.*

Taylor: It did work. I was excited by the duet idea. Yeah. That, that seemed really cool. Just something we'd never done. And it did feel perfect for this song, I thought.

Ryan: It almost felt like two partners, talking about this romantic story, you know, and it felt like having a female voice to counterpart with Kelcey's voice would just heighten the song.

Taylor: Then that kind of kicked off a fun part, which was like, okay, who could sing this song?

Ryan: For whatever reason, The Cardigans popped into my head.

Hrishikesh: The Cardigans are a Swedish band who had a big hit in the 90s with their song "Lovefool." The band's lead singer, Nina Persson, has also released two solo albums.

Ryan: I'd always loved Nina's voice. It's just this perfect combo of, like, relaxed, nonchalant, yet so confident and beautiful. Obviously everyone knows, like, "Lovefool," so there's that maybe nostalgic pull towards it, too, reminding me of kind of like growing up.

And so, if we're making a list of, you know, wild ideas, like, she would be at the top of it. We basically were just hoping that through the channels of, maybe our label or somebody, our management, could reach out and get a message to her. And so we kind of just put it out into the ether and hoped it would come back. But unfortunately, we didn't really hear anything for a minute.

We were basically about to go to London to mix the album, and we still didn't have the duet.

Taylor: So... just decided to take matters into my own hands and just emailed her, completely cold call. Wrote like a long letter saying what the song meant to us and how much it would mean to us if she could sing on it.

Ryan: And thankfully, Nina said yes.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "While the dollar is strong / While nobody else relies")*

Taylor: And so that kind of kicked off her recording it and sending us takes, like back and forth from her place in Sweden.

Ryan: And we got this like really great performance from her. Like I love the way she pronounces certain words. Like the way she says "corner," like is so great.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "When they turn the corner...")*

It's like, sensual. It's just so cool sounding to me.

*(Vocals: "Dark days in the summer / (Summer) In the rain the water's fine / (Wild) It was wild combination / (Down the line) Either that or right down the line / Ooh, it goes hand in hand / With fear for the afterlife")*

Taylor: We slotted those vocals in, the day before mixing it. It was really the last second possible.

Ryan: Thankfully, "Dark Days" ended up making the record, and uh, you know, it was never a single. But we did start playing it live. And yeah, our fans started to respond to it.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

Taylor: And we just loved having guest singers come and sing "Dark Days" with us, but it never got, like, its moment. And yet it's our, you know, number one streaming song.

Ryan: So the song had been out for about five years. And in March 2020, we got asked to perform live on Jimmy Kimmel. And so we decided to play "Dark Days."

Taylor: Yeah, I think maybe this was just a way of us trying to, like, say thank you to "Dark Days" and, you know, give it like a, at least a little bit of a proper presentation and give it a little bit of a spotlight.

Ryan: And we asked our labelmate and new friend Amelia Meath from Sylvan Esso to come and sing the duet part with us.

Amelia: My name is Amelia Meath and I am a songwriter and singer and producer in the band Sylvan Esso.

Ryan: When we met up, she basically was like, I, I have an idea for some new lyrics and, and a new kind of melody.

And to be totally honest, I was kind of like, wait, wait, what?

Amelia: I've found that in general, if I sing things that I write, it's just much easier to get a better performance out of it, because I know where the words are coming from.



Ryan: Her and I ended up talking on the phone, and I explained kind of my headspace and, and where the song came from. And, and she basically had a lot of images in her head of similar things.

Amelia: I started identifying the song as, like, a discovery of sensuality. And talking about those early summers when all of the, like, sexy feelings are new and there's so much to discover and so much to feel, that it's completely overwhelming and also really exciting and fun.

Ryan: I just felt like the song was in really safe hands.

*("Dark Days" by LOCAL NATIVES)*

*(Vocals: "Moving in the shadows / Sneaking past the warning sign")*

Amelia: For me, so many of my, like, early flirtatious moments were in the ocean, or in the pool, getting to be near somebody who I thought was cool and smart. Which is why I wanted to add the part about swimming in a pool.

*(Vocals: "Chlorine in the green light / Bodies looking out of sight")*

Ryan: Listening to it now, like, I just love her lyrics and I love her take on it.

*(Vocals: "I've been on the way, I've been on the way / I've been on the way for so long")*

"Dark Days," for me, in a lot of ways was a big turning point. I think it gave me just a lot of confidence. I knew what I wanted the song to feel like, but I also knew what I wanted it to sound like.

Having it become the song that it's become, pushed me on, in a lot of ways, to keep experimenting and growing as a producer.

Taylor: "Dark Days" is also a turning point for how Local Natives operates. Prior to this, we had this very strong feeling that if all three of us didn't touch everything, then it didn't count, in some way.

But we really learned how to trust in each other. And that's just shifted, I think, our entire dynamic based really off of this song.

Kelcey: Now, when we play it live, in lieu of finding someone to sing the duet part, we just have Ryan sing the second verse. It's become this moment that I think our fans really enjoy. 'Cause he sings lead much more rarely than Taylor or I. So then when he sings, our fans... It feels almost like the Beatles are onstage, or something, and everyone's like, starts screaming.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES - live performance)*

*(Vocals: “While the dollar is strong / While nobody else relies” )*

Ryan: A lot of times I just start laughing, like, while I'm singing cause everyone's kinda screaming. But it, it's a really sweet moment in the set.

Coming up, you'll hear how all of these ideas and elements came together in the full song.

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And now, here's “Dark Days,” by Local Natives featuring Nina Persson, in its entirety.

*(“Dark Days” by LOCAL NATIVES ft. NINA PERSSON)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream both versions of “Dark Days,” and you can watch the music video. You'll also find links for the new 2023 Local Natives album.

If you liked this episode, and you want to listen to another one, try Sylvan Esso's episode, from way back in July 2015. You can hear more from Amelia Meath and her bandmate, Nick Sanborn. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net), or wherever you listen.

This episode was produced 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.

