

Song Exploder
Sampha - Spirit 2.0
Episode 263

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.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA)

Sampha is a singer, songwriter and producer from London. His first album, *Process*, won the Mercury Prize in 2017. He's collaborated with artists like the XX, Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and Solange. If you saw the Song Exploder Netflix show, Sampha was in the Alicia Keys episode, for the song they did together as a duet. This year, in October 2023, Sampha put out his second album, *Lahai*. And for this episode, I talked to Sampha about the song "Spirit 2.0." Coming up you'll hear the original demo, and some early voice memos.

Sampha recruited some collaborators for the song, like producer Pablo Diez-Reixa, aka El Guincho, who won a Grammy for his work on Rosalia's first album; plus Yaeji; and Lisa Kaindé, from Ibeyi. But the song "Spirit 2.0" first took shape when Sampha was by himself, at home.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA)

(Vocals: "Waves will catch you (oh) / Light will catch you (ooh) / Love will catch you (oh) / Spirit gon' catch you, yeah / Faith will catch you / Friends will catch you / Time will catch you / Flash will capture us")

Sampha: My name is Sampha.

I start a lot of songs off by like, learning a new bit of gear, or plug-in. That'll kind of get my brain firing and inspire something.

And so, I'd bought a new synth. It was like late summer, 2019. I was in a music store in this street called Denmark Street in London. I'd bought like an Oberheim OB-6. I'd also bought some semi-modular synths, the Moog Mother-32s.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Moog stem)

I'm not a super techie. But I do love to experiment and spend hours on bits of music.

And I was like, oh, this is reminding me of something.

It's like a plucking of like a West African stringed instrument. Like an ngoni, or like a kora.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Additional Moog stem)

Those type of rhythms I got from listening to like Wassoulou music, from West Africa.

("Sabu," by OUMOU SANGERÉ – intro music)

My dad had like a load of CDs, and in my teens I found this album by an artist called Oumou Sangaré. It's called *Worotan*.

("Sabu," by OUMOU SANGERÉ)

(Vocals: "Bo Sabu ye mouyala / Mali denu dja sabu ye muyala / Yu malanu / A Sabu ye mouyala / Mali denu sabu ye muyala nu malanu")

It felt really kind of weirdly futuristic, but also really sort of grounded. And obviously it's all these acoustic instruments, but the way they were being played was so fresh. I don't know, I just felt like it was magic.

This felt like the first time I was really, like, genuinely connected to music that was close to where my family are from, which is Sierra Leone.

There's something innate about the way I kind of write music that shares this commonality with that type of music.

It has like, this foundation of complexity.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Moog stem)

So the song started with the Moog lines.

And so I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna build more upon that.

Do another line.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Add Moog stem)

And another line."

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Add Moog stem)

There's this writer that talks about Ghanaian percussion, where the foundation is a complex rhythm that goes up, like a piece of architecture.

So that's how I kind of felt, like what I was doing, a little bit.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Moog stems end)

So after I kind of established that with the Moogs, that's when the OB-6 came into play.

I started using it, and I was like, I couldn't get the sounds I was hoping to get out of it for a bit.

But then I decided to, like, bring all my synths to the sofa. *(chuckles)* It's just a place to just really relax, just to, like, figure it out, and that's where I started to, like, really fall in love with it.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - OB-6 chords)

I tuned the oscillators a fifth apart from each other and came across these particular chords.

I was kind of transported.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Add Moog plucking sound to OB-6 chords)

When I listen to that, I'm like, that's it. I personally could just listen to it.

And that's what I did for a while. Just that, on loop, just chords and Moog.

And I would go to parks, and I was, it would just be like a calming thing. And it was really resonating with me.

And I put down some drums.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Add drums)

And eventually, I had like a vocal melody idea.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Demo with gibberish lyrics)

It put me in quite a reflective space.

I was feeling like I needed some bird's eye view on my life. Every day was kind of just becoming, I guess, *Groundhog Day*-ish, and I was just in it.

And I didn't really, I had no control over it or wasn't thinking about how to steer my life.

Cuz there's times where I felt like very numb or apathetic.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Demo gibberish lyrics, back into beat)

I still mess with this one. Like the tempo of it, cuz it's slightly faster and, that kind of half time vibe, but I still have love for it.

But in the final version, I'd slow it down.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Demo, slowed down)

And I just started to hear this other drum beat in my head. (Imitates drums)
"Dum-dum-dum-dum."

And then I was like, hearing this kind of breakbeat version of the tune.

I was thinking about programming it with electronic drums. But then, I kind of wanted something that felt a bit more acoustic, or, like, woody.

That's when I went to a studio called RAK, in London, and invited Yussef Dayes down.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Drums)

Yussef is a drummer, producer, artist in his own right. And he's just really one of my favorite drummers.

I sort of, like, roughly gave him, like, the kick pattern that I was thinking of. And I wanted like, halftime drums here, and then it can switch to something.

And then he sort of just took that and just went, "Fffffff." Took it to like, a level that was, like, beyond what I was imagining.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Chorus drums)

I make music a lot in like, pictures in my head. One of the pictures was like being in like a moonlit room.

(Isolated vocals: "Lyin' in reflections / Moonlight hits your skin")

And in my head I was thinking about the sun sort of hitting the moon and reflecting into this room in my mum's house. There was a particular type of moonlight that was really beautiful. So I was imagining being in this moonlit room with someone else, having a conversation.

(Isolated vocals: "Safe in conversation / You question where I've been")

And another visual I was having was, like, me sort of levitating through the ceiling towards the moon, and then I imagined falling.

That's where all the "catch you" lyrics start to come in.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Chorus)

(Vocals: "Waves will catch you / Light will catch you / Love will catch you / Spirit gon' catch you, yeah / Faith will catch you / Friends will catch you / Time will catch you / Flash will capture us)

I was thinking a lot about spirituality at the time, but I don't think I was living a life that was recognizing my need for whatever I thought the spirit was.

I feel like a lot of these questions came around as well when I started to like, lose people in my life. And I'd be like, Oh, I haven't had any sort of spiritual connection. In terms of someone being like, I'm here. It's like, I can no longer locate them, apart from in my mind and my memory. And looking for some sort of, like, healing, and trying to open up yourself to be helped, can be a difficult journey.

(Vocals: "Traveling for healing / How far will I go?")

Then I had like a solid version of it, and left it for a few months. The pandemic hit. And then I had a daughter, and the gulf between actually working on the music started to grow.

I got to a point, a few months after my daughter was born, thinking about, how am I going to actually reconnect with working on music? And I feel like I might need a bit of, like, help.

And that's when I reached out to, El Guincho, Pablo, and he heard "Spirit," and he, like, loved it.

And he had some arrangement ideas.

He was like, Oh, maybe start the song off with the chorus.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Chorus)

(Vocals: "Waves will catch you (oh) / Light will catch you (ooh) / Love will catch you (oh) / Spirit gon' catch you, yeah")

He didn't want to completely, like, rework my whole song and like take it and make it something totally different. He just wanted to like help me add and finish and sort of was like really respectful of my vision.

And then, for the rap vocal bit, I just came up with the flow.

But then I recorded it as a call and response to myself.

(Vocals: "Just like Jonathan Livingston (Seagull) (Woo) / Try catch the clouds as I (free fall) (Yeah) / I was caught by the wings of my (people) (Woo) / Then you pick me up in your (two-door)")

I reference Jonathan Livingston Seagull, which is a book that my brother used to read to me when I was a young boy, for bedtime.

He was a bird who wanted to perfect flying. He would climb up high, and then he would dive down at, like, ridiculous speeds. And... somehow I think I was just envisioning this, as well, whilst I was envisioning myself falling, but then sort of being caught by friends, or faith, or wings of my, my people.

(Vocals: "I was caught by the wings of my (people) / Then you pick me up in your (two-door)")

There's Lisa from Ibeyi, who's kind of like, doubling up what I'm doing in this section.

(Vocals: "Shutting down is your (default) / Circling for a (cheat code) / Sun is out and it (feels cold) / Camera zoom on the (eagle) / Find a bench and we (recall) / Memories through a (peephole) / Reconnect with the (real goal) / Camera zoom on my (people)")

I just love her voice. I feel like I wouldn't have been able to give that same energy.

And I think after that, I started to envision strings. I'd always wanted to work with Owen Pallett, who is a Canadian artist, string arranger.

And I've just been a big fan, especially of his album *In Conflict*.

In particular a song called "The Passions."

The strings on there are just like... Some of the most beautiful strings I've ever heard.

("The Passions," by OWEN PALLETT - String section)

He does this thing, this, like, sort of, microtonal ascending cluster of chords. I was like, this is so beautiful. Doing something like this in this particular section of the second chorus would be amazing.

And so, Owen, he arranged the song, and, then like, a 32-piece orchestra recorded it.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA - Second chorus strings and vocals)

(Vocals: "Faith will catch you / Friends will catch you / Time will catch you")

And then, by the time I thought I'd finished the song, I met up with Yaeji.

She heard some of the music and then she was like, do you want me to just jump on the mic? And she just freestyled a bunch of stuff.

She was singing in Korean, I didn't really understand what she was saying.

(Vocals: "하고 싶었던 말들은 어디에 갔나")

It was something along the lines of, "What do the words say? Where did the words go?"

And she translated it, and I was like, oh wow. A lot of this is kind of resonating with what I'm writing about. And we sort of just found space for some of it on "Spirit."

(Vocals: "말들은 어디에 갔나")

Hrishikesh: Do you think that your daughter's birth influenced the song in any way?

Sampha: It influenced the title. I mean, the reason I added the 2.0 onto "Spirit"... I was thinking about all these instruments, and being surrounded by technology. But

also, I had a daughter, and that was the first time I actually had this, like, strong feeling of like, feeling my mum. Which I hadn't really had, up until that point.

Hrishikesh: When did you lose your mom?

Sampha: In 2015. Yeah. And I got to thinking about being like a part of a continuum, this connection to everything, including her.

And thinking about the future, and the past.

When you gain something, it naturally reminds you of what you've lost as well.

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

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And now, here's "Spirit 2.0," by Sampha, in its entirety.

("Spirit 2.0," by SAMPHA)

For more visit songexploder.net/sampha. You'll find links to buy or stream "Spirit 2.0."

If you're looking for another episode to listen to after this, check out the Ibeyi episode from 2017. Lisa Kaindé, who sang backing vocals on "Spirit 2.0," breaks down a song with her twin sister and bandmate Naomi Diaz. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at songexploder.net, or wherever you listen.

This episode was made by me, Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, 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.