

Song Exploder
Sam Smith - Stay With Me
Episode 276

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH)

Sam Smith is a Grammy and Oscar-winning singer and songwriter from London, England. Their first album, *In the Lonely Hour*, came out in 2014. It went quintuple platinum in the US, and the biggest hit from that album is the song "Stay With Me," which has over 2 billion streams on Spotify alone.

For this episode, in honor of the song's 10th anniversary, I talked to Sam about how "Stay With Me" was made. I also talked to Sam's frequent collaborator, Jimmy Napes, who is an award-winning producer and songwriter as well. The two of them tell the story of how the song began, and how it turned into the hit that it became. And then, years later, how it changed again.

(Vocals: "Oh, won't you stay with me / 'Cause you're all I need / This ain't love, it's clear to see / But darling, stay with me")

(music fades out)

Sam: My name is Sam Smith.

Before writing this song, I was working in a bar for about two, three years post-leaving school, trying to make money and trying to pay my rent in London.

Singing and performing was something I always loved. But at that time, I remember being in my flat, and I made a pact with myself. And I said to myself, if I don't make it in the next year, I'm gonna leave London, and I'm gonna travel around the world.

Because I was to the point where I was so tired of hustling to be a singer. And so, yeah, I gave myself one year.

And I, just by chance, met Jimmy Napes, who also wrote this song with me, in 2012.

Jimmy: I'm Jimmy Napes. I'm a songwriter and producer.

Sam: I met Jimmy because I had a manager called Elvin Smith.

I was working in the bar, and Elvin took me to go and sing for Jimmy in his studio in London, almost as an audition. And I sat down at the piano, and I played and I sang for Jimmy.

Jimmy: When I heard Sam sing, it was instantly obvious to me that Sam was gonna be a superstar. Even though they were working in a bar at the time. I'd never heard a voice like it.

Sam: And so he started to want to write with me, after my work shift.
So I'd go on my lunch break, or I'd go after the bar. And we wrote nonstop.

Jimmy: The first day we ever wrote a song together, we wrote a song which was "Lay Me Down," which was an amazing start for us.

Hrishikesh: "Lay Me Down" would go on to become the first single from Sam's debut album. It hit the top 10 on the Billboard Charts.

Sam: And then I met Disclosure, the dance duo.

Jimmy: Disclosure heard the song "Lay Me Down," and loved Sam's voice, and loved the song.
And we went down, myself and Sam, to where the boys lived, and we wrote "Latch."

Sam: The song reached number 10 in the charts in the UK.

Jimmy: I had been working really hard, but not having any luck or any hits, is the hard truth of it. So it was kind of unbelievable.
You know, these moments were in the space of a few weeks of each other, and we'd written "Lay Me Down" and "Latch" in our first couple of writing sessions, which went on to change all of our lives.

Sam: And I got a record deal, so I was able to leave my day job.
And then I was being, you know, sent to so many different writers. It was like speed dating.

Jimmy: The label was starting to put Sam with a lot of different co-writers and producers and people that were far more established than myself at the time.

Sam: Jimmy didn't have any hits under his belt other than "Latch," and the label stupidly weren't listening to the music we were making.

Jimmy: But I just knew Sam and I had this connection.

Sam: There was magic being made with me and Jimmy. And thank God we listened to that, in the end.
So, the day that we started writing "Stay With Me," I think I was a little bit hungover, because I'd been going out at that time, trying to find a boyfriend.
And I, I went to the studio with Jimmy, but also with an artist called Tourist.

Jimmy: My good mate Will goes by the name Tourist.

Sam: It was a risky day, I remember, because Tourist was an incredible dance producer. But I'd been working with real pop writers.

And so me, Jimmy, and Tourist all together... no one knew what was gonna come of it.

I'd been doing constant writing sessions, and some incredible music had been made. But we were missing something anthemic. We were missing *the song*.

The pressure of the hit [chuckles] is a mad thing.

Um, so I walked into the studio with a mission, for sure.

But I think the mission was overridden by the story I needed to tell that day.

Will was by the piano, and he was just playing around with chords.

And then, he hit those first three chords.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano chords)

I just stood up and I said, stop.

(demo piano chords end)

I told everyone to stop. Because they made me want to cry. They just, they spoke to me.

Jimmy: The chords to "Stay With Me" are so simple, but they instantly felt really classic and special.

Sam: I was working with so many musicians that were, you know, showing me all these complex chords, and playing all this complex music.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano chords)

But those three chords... They just sounded honest.

Do you know what it is? It's the space. There's space.

My head was busy. And the space left room for me to speak my mind.

Jimmy: Normally I'm playing the piano when I write. But because Will's such a great pianist, and he was there that day, I had to find another place to be.

So I sat myself on the drum kit and just played that really simple beat.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - isolated demo drums)

Sam: Jimmy's not a drummer.

Jimmy: Definitely not a *good* drummer.

Sam: But that also, by the way, makes him one of the most amazing drummers, actually. Only Jimmy can drum in the way that he drums.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano and drums)

Jimmy: It just gave it that feeling and that head nod-y movement that we wrote to in the room, you know. So I've wrote from the drum kit, which I've never done before, or since [chuckles].

Sam: It just shows that writing music, you don't have to be the most incredible piano player or the most incredible singer, or the most incredible drummer. You just need to feel. And Jimmy could feel it.

I remember he'd started playing the drums, and he actually put his arms up in the air and started singing.

He started with an A sound. It was like "ah, with me." But he didn't say "stay."

But it just felt big. I remember watching, I remember sitting there watching him do that. And I felt like I was in a stadium.

That's when the lyric "stay with me" came.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano and vocals)

(Vocals: "Stay with me")

As soon as we had those words, I immediately knew what I wanted.

I was 21 years old. I was gay, and never had a boyfriend, and was so desperate to experience love and to experience a relationship. And I was going out so much. And the queer scene in London that I was going out in was aggressive and cold at times. I was surrounded by drugs and sex, and I really just wanted a boyfriend so bad. And people wanted to sleep with me, but people left it at that.

So I, I just felt very, very isolated, and I felt late to the party. And I think when you feel late to the party, when you, you haven't experienced love, you start to think, what's wrong with me?

So, when I heard those three chords, it put me into that feeling of loneliness.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano and vocals)

(Vocals: "Guess it's true, I'm not good at a one-night stand / But I still need love 'cause I'm just a man")

I knew that I wanted this to be about a one-night stand. I knew I, I wanted it to be about that feeling when you wake up in the morning, with a one-night stand, and just wishing that they would stay, and wanna stay and wanna come back and wanna be with me.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - demo piano cont'd)

And that feeling is so desperately sad, because they leave. And I wanted to capture that.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - add vocals)

(Vocals: "These nights never seem to go to plan / I don't want you to leave, will you hold my hand?")

My voice sounds so different! It's crazy.

When I started singing that, I was, I was a fresh fish. I'd been singing for a while, but my cords were all like, beautiful and pink and just like vibrating so perfectly.

Now, my cords are battered. [laughs]

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - isolated vocals)

(Vocals: "Why am I so emotional? / No, it's not a good look, gain some self-control")

Sometimes the most beautiful poetry is just how you'd honestly say something.

And so I didn't want to sound clever, just for the sake of sounding clever. I wanted to sound honest.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - isolated vocals)

(Vocals: "Deep down, I know this never works / But you can lay with me so it doesn't hurt /

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - add piano)

(Vocals: "Oh, won't you stay with me / 'Cause you're all I need / This ain't love, it's clear to see / But darling, stay with me")

But the chorus, if I'm honest, was missing something. And what I realized it was missing was a choir. But we didn't have a choir. We didn't have enough money to get a choir.

Jimmy: So I was like, well, it's just us, but let's try and make this feel like a real chorus.

Sam: It was just me and Jimmy, and we worked overtime that night.

Jimmy: I started recording Sam in different parts of the room.

And the mic stayed in the exact same position.

But what's cool about that is, as Sam moved around the room, you'd get a special effect, like it is a choir.

Essentially, it's as if there are many, many Sams in the room.

Sam: And we built this sound up...

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - isolated backing vocals)

(Vocals: "Stay with me")

Jimmy: ...just layering them up over and over again.

(Vocals: "All I need")

Sam: I'd actually like, pretend to be different people. So there's, I'd, like, pretend to be like, really low... 'cause my range back then was a lot bigger.

So I stretched my voice as hard as I could.

I remember being so sure of myself doing it, even though I didn't know what the fuck I was doing.

And then, when I finished, I stood in the live room and we played it back, with the lead vocal over the top.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - all vocals)

(Vocals: "(Stay with me) / 'Cause you're / (All I need) / This ain't love, it's clear to see / But darling / (Stay with me)")

Jimmy: When we played it back, I just had goosebumps.

And I spoke on the talkback. I said, oh, Sam, that was amazing. Like, can we get one more, one more take?

And, um, Sam didn't answer.

Sam: I didn't let Jimmy see me. I had my back to him.

Jimmy: And I was like, are you okay? And I went, I just like, left the computer and went in the other room and Sam was crying.

Sam: I just burst into tears. 'Cause that sound that we created, it was the sound of the feeling that I was trying to express.

Jimmy: They could hear it all come together and it was just emotional, like in real time.

Sam: It sounds mad, but I felt close in that moment to something bigger than me.
It's the only way to explain it. That was the moment the song changed.

Jimmy: The process of getting the record finished was an amazing one.

Sam: So we went to, um, RAK Studios to join together with incredible musicians.

Jimmy: We tried lots of things.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - drums, bass)

So, that's Earl's drums and Jodi's bass.

And then we were playing around with the organ.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - organ)

Sam: I think the organ creates an atmosphere. It's like a holy hum.

I grew up in Catholic school, and I was singing in choirs since I was a child.

There's certain instruments and sounds that can just put you into a state of meditation.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - add percussion)

The label wanted us to write a bridge. And it didn't feel right.

I said everything I needed to say. It's very simple. I'm asking someone to stay with me.

And so, I just knew that this was a time for, you know, my make-believe audience to put their hands in the air and just sing.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - bridge "oohs" and ad libs)

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - bridge "oohs" and ad libs fade down)

Simon Hale is a great, dear friend of mine and he composes all of my string parts.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - strings)

Jimmy: He did a beautiful string arrangement, which we used very sparsely. It only comes in at the very end. But it just takes it up another notch.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - strings)

Sam: That was the first time I ever heard an orchestra being recorded onto my music, and oh my God. What a joy. What a surreal moment. It was unbelievable.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - strings fade down)

Maybe "Stay With Me" was my siren song, because after I released that, I got boyfriends [chuckles], and guys did stay. I experienced love almost immediately, really, after writing that song. And I think that I had to get that off my chest a little bit.

And I think by being vulnerable, from standing up and saying, I'm lonely as fuck, and I need someone and I want to feel that, I think I called love to me.

And I come to that song now as someone who knows what love feels like. So that song really healed me, honestly.

But I've always been a non-binary person. And I just recently found the right language to express who I am.

And the second line in "Stay with Me" says, "'cause I'm just a *man*."

Hrishikesh: And how does that line sit with you today?

Sam: It is a really hard one. I was on tour whilst I was changing my pronouns, and all throughout my transition... Coming to terms with who I was, and singing that lyric every night.

And my friend Simon Aldred, who's an amazing songwriter, said to me, you wrote that song when you were 21, and it's a moment in time. Just leave it as that.

But the truth of the matter is, when it comes to that lyric... it's just, the word *man*. The word *man* is, is triggering to me, now. 'Cause it's not how I feel. So, I started to not relate to the song as much.

And I didn't want that distance with "Stay With Me."

Jimmy: Sam called me, actually, which was very respectful and just said, would I mind if they changed it when they perform live.

And I said, no, absolutely not. Go for it. You've got to um, love what you sing. And, and, you know, it's gotta be true to you.

Sam: At first, I think it was quite a daunting idea to think about me changing a lyric in

that specific song.

But, basically, I went to sing at the White House for this incredible moment for the queer community.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - live performance at White House)

Hrishikesh: This was in December 2022, on the day the Respect for Marriage Act was signed into law.

Sam: And they asked me to sing "Stay With Me."

It felt wrong to stand in that moment and say the word *man*.

And so, on that day I changed the lyrics to "baby understand," which is not the most amazing. I've, I've rattled my brain about what to say for years and years and years.

But it's the closest thing that I can get to the same feeling as the original lyric.

(Vocals: "Boy, you know I'm not good at a one-night stand / But I still need love, baby understand / These nights never seem to go to plan / But I don't want you to leave, will you hold my hand?")

And so, ever since the performance at the White House, I've never sang the word *man* again.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - instrumental outro - strings)

I promised myself, in that moment, that that was the turning point, and I would never return to that lyric. And I feel so much better about it. [chuckles]

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH - instrumental outro - strings and piano)

You know, I think that's the beauty in songwriting, is that it can actually evolve with you. It's just so personal, and it should always be personal.

(Vocals: "But darling, stay with me")

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 the updated version of "Stay With Me," by Sam Smith, in its entirety.

("Stay With Me" by SAM SMITH)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Stay With Me," and you can watch the music video. You can also watch the video of Sam's performance of the song at the White House.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Our production assistant is Tigerlily Biskup. 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.