

Song Exploder
Troye Sivan - One of Your Girls
Episode 279

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.

("One Of Your Girls" by TROYE SIVAN)

I think it's really, really difficult to write a song that's both funny and emotional. That's a hard needle to thread. But I think that's what Troye Sivan did with the song that's in this episode.

Troye Sivan is a singer and songwriter from Australia. He's been nominated for a Golden Globe, two Grammys, and he's won four of Australia's ARIA awards. His song "My My My!" was a #1 hit on the Billboard Dance Chart, and his third album, *Something to Give Each Other*, was one of Billboard's picks for the best albums of 2023. Troye's also an actor; he was in the HBO series *The Idol*, which figures into the story that he tells about this song. He came over to the studio and we talked about how he made one of his big hits, the song "One of Your Girls." For that song, he worked with two of his longtime collaborators: his frequent songwriting partner, Leland, and producer Oscar Görres.

(Vocals: "Give me a call if you ever get desperate / I'll be like one of your girls")

(music fades down)

Troye: I'm Troye Sivan.

(music fades out)

The story of "One of Your Girls" begins with guys who I was talking to that were maybe flirting with me that had not been with guys prior.

There are these boys, I know plenty of them, that are just like... too cool to be straight, you know what I mean? Like, at least too cool to be 100% straight. And even if they are straight, they're never gonna let you know that. Because it's like, kind of part of their mystique and appeal, I think, to be this like metrosexual "it boy."

That character, I just know him really well. He's, like, tall and he's hot and he's, like, fashionable. Like, he takes film photos.

The guy that specifically started the song, the guy that it's specifically about, he's very funny, and he is like one of my friends, actually.

And he told me, he's like, I don't know, sometimes I just, like, feel a little gay when I start drinking, or whatever, you know, if I've, like, had a couple drinks. And maybe I kind of wanna explore that.

And he was very open about it and sweet about it. And so then I was like, okay, well, let me know if you're feeling gay on Saturday night, 'cause I'm free.

You know, some of these guys, they just think it's kind of fun to get the attention and flirt with a gay guy as kind of like a joke. And then there's maybe someone who is like quite deeply closeted and who's actually not straight, and, you know, exploring that.

And I've had, kind of, both of those experiences and experiences all along the spectrum on it. And I would create that safe space for them, but then, at the end of the day, you're still kind of like... alone.

So there is this, like, deep longing and this deep sense of, like, melancholy, I think.

But what was really interesting to me was like, why do *I* keep putting *myself* in this situation? How does this keep happening?

And that was the starting point of the song.

At the time that this happened, I was in the studio with Leland and Oscar Görres, Swedish pop producer, who I've worked with for years. Same thing with Leland. Leland and I have been writing together for almost 10 years at this point.

And Oscar and I, and Leland, we'd been writing for a couple of months. And we were probably, like, in the middle of the album at this point. So we finished on a Friday. This was the weekend where I said to my friend, lemme know if you're feeling gay on Saturday night.

That weekend, unfortunately, Oscar went through some family stuff. And he went into the studio on the Saturday, while kind of processing his family stuff that was going on back in Sweden.

And he started with this melancholy loop that he made, where he sings this, like, vocal "ooh."

(backing vocals loop: "ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh")

And the drum groove.

(add drum groove)

This bassline.

(add bass)

And the arpeggiated synth.

(drum groove out, add arpeggiated synth)

(bass and synth out, cont'd vocal "ooh")

So then, when Leland and I come in on the Monday, Oscar starts telling us about his family and he plays this loop.

(voice memo - loop)

And Leland and I are singing out into the room, and in the voice note, you can hear me go,

(voice memo - Troye: "Ah, Oscar, I love this!")

There was just something so emotive and, like, hypnotic to me about this loop. And we've never made anything like this before.

(voice memo loop ends, applause, Leland: "Beautiful." Troye: "So good.")

And so we started writing the verse. I've just had this experience with this guy. And I was explaining to Leland and Oscar this type of guy, and I was like, let's write about him.

(bass, drum groove)

Sometimes I'll think to myself, what would Gaga sing? What would blah, blah, blah sing on this? And so, this loop and this bassline got me thinking about, like, an Adele song. What would Adele do for a verse melody? And I sang:

(vocals: "Everybody loves you, baby.")

That feels like something that maybe she would sing.

(vocals: "You should trademark your face")

It's like, I'm imagining this line of like, girls, boys, everybody wants to be with this guy.

(vocals: "Linin' down the block to be around you / But, baby, I'm first in place")

And then Oscar had the acoustic guitar just in his lap, and he started to strum that when we were writing.

(bass, drum groove out)

(acoustic guitar)

When he started playing that, I felt this longing.

I think the thing when I'm songwriting that I'm really searching for... of course I'm trying to tell a story, but I'm really trying to create a feeling.

(acoustic guitar cont'd)

I'm just kind of, like, feeling so moved by this music.

And then I started to make these kind of like queer references. Like:

(vocals: "Face card, no cash, no credit")

"Face card, no cash, no credit." In queer culture, ballroom culture specifically, someone's face card is their face. And it's part of their sort of like currency.

This person can show up to the front of any line at any restaurant, or any club, any party. They just show their face and they get let right in.

(vocals: "Face card, no cash, no credit")

I've never really done like a spoken part on a song. It's scary to me. I think it takes a certain amount of confidence.

You can very easily feel quite silly speaking in a low, sexy tone into a microphone. It's a bit embarrassing. It's quite camp. And I think sometimes the fear of embarrassment would've prevented me from doing that, even if I thought it was really going to be cool on the song. But Oscar and Leland have heard me do much, much, much more embarrassing things.

(acoustic guitar cont'd, bass, drum groove)

Then "Yes, God," another queer culture ballroom saying.

(vocals: "Yes, God. Don't speak. You said it.")

So without saying a word, they've said all that they need to say.

(vocals: "Skip the application interview")

And then...

(vocals: "Sweet like Marabou")

...the pre-chorus finishes out with "Sweet like Marabou."

(music fades out)

I had "Sweet like," and then I was like, ugh, "Malibu" is so, like, expected here. You know, the place, and the drink, and it just kind of like, has been done a million times.

But, Oscar thought that I said "Marabou". I was like, no, what is that? He's like, "It's a Swedish chocolate". And I was like, that's perfect. *(laughs)*

Sweden is a very special place to me. I've spent so much time writing with Swedes. I wrote "My My My!" in Sweden. I've had Oscar as such a special friend in my life and collaborator in my life and having had all of these beautiful experiences in Sweden, "sweet like Marabou", I had never tried the chocolate until very, very recently. But I was like, it's a Swedish chocolate, let's do it. It was a little wink to the fact that Oscar was sitting next to me.

(vocals: "Look at you / Skip the application, interview / Sweet like Marabou / Look, look at you")

This pre-chorus just feels so special to me. It's hot, it's sexy, it's longing, it's sad, it's happy. It's like, all of these things. It's, like, the gayest I've ever felt.

And then comes the chorus and we are completely stuck.

At this point, as well, the pressure is heavily applied, because this is my nightmare. I try and write chorus first because that's the part of the song that I'm intimidated by. I don't like it when I start with a verse and pre chorus, because if I fall in love with them verse and pre, now you've gotta write the most important

part of the song, trying to live up to this verse and pre that you already are so in love with.

(Daft Punk-feeling arpeggiated synth)

And the chorus has this really cool Daft Punk-feeling, arpeggiated synth that's moving all around. And trying to find the melody in that felt really difficult.

(synth fades out)

So then, overnight, I'm, like, thinking about it. And we're filming *The Idol* at this time, the TV show with The Weeknd.

There is a song in *The Idol* called "One of The Girls," that's like being talked about on set and stuff like that. It's part of the plot of the show. I don't think about it; it's one of those things where it goes into the back of my mind, and just sits in the back of my mind.

And Abel is like a film buff. Abel is The Weeknd. And he shows me this YouTube video, and this robot is in the recording studio and he's singing and he's, like, sad. His voice is like this vocoder voice. And I'm like, wow, this robot really, really wants to connect with humans, and he can't; he's having a really hard time with it. And simultaneously, I've just had this experience with this guy.

And I'm like, I wonder if the chorus should be like that sad robot, because of how disconnected I feel from this guy. And so then, I'm in the shower and I'm like:

(makes robot sounds)

And I'm like, making these, like, robot sounds, and a melody comes.

And then I said, "I'll be like one of your girls or your homies" in that, like, robot voice.

And I was like, I think I've cracked the chorus.

(vocals, with vocoder: "Give me a call if you ever get lonely / I'll be like one of your girls or your homies")

My favorite, favorite thing in the chorus is the way that it flips. Because it starts with "give me a call if you ever get lonely", and then it ends with "give me a call if you ever get *desperate*".

(vocals, with vocoder: "Give me a call if you ever get desperate / I'll be like one of your girls")

That flip really reflected, so accurately, how I felt about myself in the situation. It's not just about him. It's also kind of having an effect on me.

(chorus instrumental)

The chorus felt like it really captured all of that. But there was a weird B part.

Just sort of this, like, instrumental section, in the middle of the chorus. And I knew that it wasn't right, but we couldn't solve it. We tried a million things, but nothing felt right. And I knew that it could be my favorite song, but it wasn't yet.

(vocals: "Everybody wants you, baby")

(instrumental fades out)

The most treacherous part of a pop song is the top of the second verse.

I think that's where you're most likely to lose people. Because they've now heard the, quote unquote, best bit of the song, and they've heard kind of like all of the parts except for the bridge.

And they can make their mind up whether or not they're interested in listening to the rest of the song. And so I often try to put something interesting and ear catching at the top of the second verse, so that you don't wanna stop listening.

And every single time I would listen to this song, and it would get to that section,

(vocals: "Everybody wants you, baby")

I would sing "e-very-bo-dy."

And I was imagining it as a sample. But we're like searching through samples, and like, nothing is hitting.

And then it hits me. I'm like, oh, this is like a Backstreet Boys thing. And I go into the booth and I layer all of these vocals and then Oscar puts this, like, really sick automation plugin on it.

(layered background vocals: "E-very-bo-dy")

And it is like one of my favorite moments in the song.

There's an element of humor in this song. There's a few moments of it. Number one:

(lead vocals: "You should insure that waist")

"You should insure that waist." And, afterwards, there's this background vocal where it's like "with the highest policy you can get."

(background vocals: "With the highest policy you can get")

(bongo groove)

Funny lyric to me. We're just making ourselves laugh and it's got this sort of like under the sea, islandy kind of feel.

Which leads to this "sha la la," which almost feels like a, like a Lū'au vibe.

(laughs)

(background vocals: "Sha-lalala-lalalaaa / Sha-lalalalala")

It's really just me and Oscar and Leland sprinkling in these little treats for ourselves. Things that make us smile.

I feel as though I've sort of gone to, like, the School of Swedish Pop Writing.

I think I've sort of been raised by Swedish pop songwriters. And Max Martin, he is like my idol. He wrote "Baby One More Time" for Britney. He wrote like all of those incredible Backstreet Boys songs. All the way up to like, 1989, the Taylor Swift album. And when I first met with MXM, which is Max Martin's publishing company — this was many, many years ago now — they were like, okay, cool. You know, we think that you would write really well with X and Y from our company. Come in and try and do some sessions. And that's how I met Oscar.

So now, you know, all these years later, Max Martin, I've never worked with him directly. But, back in LA, it's his studio. So sometimes he comes in to hear what we're up to.

We play him a few songs and he is sitting on the couch and he's listening. And then we play "One of Your Girls" and he stands up. And the energy in the room kind of, like, shifted. And then he's like, "Play it again". And he looks at me and he's like, "Is the lyric...?" And he says the chorus lyric to me. And I was like, yes. And he was like, "It's fucking brilliant," or something like that. And I was like, wait, what is going on?

And he walked over to the synth, and he plays

(Max Martin's synth)

I'm, like, over the moon because I'm like, Max just played something on one of my songs.

(arpeggiated synth and Max Martin's synth together)

And we saved the song. And I was like, this is almost something really, really, really special. But for some reason, the chorus is still not as strong as the rest of the parts. And that was really frustrating.

(synths fade out)

And so then I go to London to work with Oscar. And the studio that we booked just because it was what was available, had this massive, massive live room that had, like, timpani.

Oscar's an insanely talented, classically trained multi-instrumentalist. And so, put us in this massive room and he's like, "Wait, should we put a timpani roll in "One of Your Girls"? Like, we've got the timpani."

(timpani roll)

There was a version where, like, we were trying so hard to make the chorus really hit. So there was, like, big drum fills. And then I was like, wait, Oscar, what if it's like the saddest, like, worst drum fill you've ever heard? It's the sad robot. He's in the studio and he's like, just depressed.

That's what we ended up doing. This sort of weak little "dum, dum, dum."

(sad drum fill)

And then I re-record my chorus vocal.

It needs to sound like me. But it needs to sound like this, like, disconnected version of me. And so it's like my falsetto is singing on top of the Vocoder.

(falsetto chorus vocals: "Give me a call if you ever get lonely / I'll be like one of your girls or your homies")

I love layering a high, breathy falsetto on things. It was ultra-important to add this element of silkiness and seductiveness and femininity to the song. But

structurally, there's still this long B part in the middle where we don't know what to do.

(chorus B part instrumental)

And I'm sitting in my hotel in London, and I've got the chorus stuck in my head. And I get to the part where it would be the B part.

(B part instrumental fades out)

But because there's nothing written there and it's just an instrumental part, I just skipped it and I sang the last two lines of the chorus, and I had this like "aha" moment where I was like, oh. We just don't need it. *(chuckles)* We just need to cut the B part.

And immediately the song made total sense to me.

(vocals: "Say what you want, and I'll keep it a secret / You got the key to my heart, and I need it / Give me a call if you ever get desperate / I'll be like one of your girls")

I've always been fascinated by the fact that Oscar and I, we had this weekend where we each have these separate experiences that then, on the Monday, collide. And you create something that none of you were expecting.

And when it all was done, I mean this sounds dramatic, but it felt like my manifesto.

(synth)

I was like, okay, this is very, very clearly, to me, the centerpiece of this album.

I think it's such a queer song. I mean like, the subject matter, the way that it feels, the cadence, the eternal longing *(laughs)*, the dysphoria, the feeling of, like, throwing yourself at someone, the warmth, the humor... All of those things are like, very, very queer to me.

(add vocal "ooh")

This is the most "me" that anything has ever felt, I think. And seeing the response to it, it is like everything that I ever hoped that it would be. I don't know. I just, I feel really seen from the song and like, proud. Yeah.

(music fades out)

Hrishikesh: So, at this point, do you feel like you're done with these kinds of flirty, may-or-may-not-be-straight, fashion boys?

Troye: No, no, no, no. When the song came out, it got worse. *(laughs)* Because they all got the idea. They were like, oh wait, I can, like, hit up Troye. *(laughs)*

(background vocals: "Sha-lalalalala")

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of this came together in the final song.

And now, here's "One of Your Girls," by Troye Sivan, in its entirety.

("One Of Your Girls" by TROYE SIVAN)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "One of Your Girls," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Our production assistant is Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more at radiotopia.fm.

And if you'd like to hear more from me, you can sign up for my newsletter. You can find a link to it on the Song Exploder website. You can also follow me and Song Exploder on instagram, and you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.