

**Song Exploder**  
**Yola - Symphony**  
**Episode 286**

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.

Yola is a singer/songwriter and actress. She released her solo debut album in 2019, which was nominated for 4 Grammys, including Best New Artist and Best Americana Album. And Rolling Stone named it one of the best Country albums of the year. But the thing is, Yola's music career wasn't new, and her background wasn't in Country music. She's from Bristol in the UK, and starting back in the early 2000s, she was a vocalist recording tracks for DJs and electronic music producers.

Yola: I cut my teeth on a little known scene called the Broken Beat scene in West London. Being like a front woman for hire. And I got hired by a group called Bugz in the Attic. It had a lot of jazz in it, had a lot of funk in it, it had a dance-y element to it. And that was, like, a big part of what built me.

Hrishikesh: And so, in January 2025, Yola put out an EP called My Way. And as you'll hear her explain in this episode, a lot of her new music is motivated by wanting to assert her identity beyond the Americana and country music boundaries. In addition to her music, she's also acting – she played Sister Rosetta Tharpe in the 2022 film Elvis, and she starred on Broadway in the musical Hadestown. For this episode, I talked to Yola about her song "Symphony," along with co-writer and co-producer Sean Douglas. Coming up, Yola and Sean trace the journey of the song "Symphony," and, along with it, Yola traces her own journey, too.

*("Symphony" by YOLA)*

*(Vocals: "Where we're going, we can't come back / Feel the tempo, just like that / Play my heartstrings with both of your hands / And I'll sing like a symphony / I'll sing like a symphony / For you, yeah")*

Yola: When I first landed here, when I moved from the UK to the US, I'd lost my mother. And I was kind of communing with the music that me and my mother bonded over, which was a lot of Shania Twain to be honest, and some Dolly and some other things. But, and so I kind of went into that space with the will to commune with her a little bit, musically.

But then once I was done with that, it dawned on me that like, people didn't seem to exercise a whole lot of curiosity as to how the hell I got here.

And it's, "Oh! Because you're centering the things that we need you to center, which is that you're holding legendary white artists aloft. You're centering whiteness, which society wants, generally." I was like, that's not my mission in life. I'm allowed to be a fan without decapitating my entire personality. (chuckles)

But my story is going to be different, because I'm from a different continent and my parents are from Barbados and Ghana and just being first generation and being a Brit, all of that makes my story.

And so, when I was writing this song, well it was just before I was writing this song, I was dating. And, I think I needed to move cities to date.

I was still living in Nashville, and I was flying to New York to date. Yeah, I spent like a summer staying at my friend's house. And we went to these cool little Hip Hop 50 events that were going on around the city. And I just felt like everywhere I went, I was having a different permutation of blackness that was like, not related to the other in any way. And so like, I felt like I was just in this place where I was a living example of non-monolithic blackness, and that was really feeding to me and that as a result, the likelihood of me finding my person was going to be there, and so I then made a mission to spend some time in New York and be dating more seriously.

That's what this era has been, has been me realizing that if I don't tell my story now, then my narrative will be co-opted by people who love the mammy paradigm. The plus-sized, dark-skinned black woman in service, who joyfully and willfully shucks her own agency. And that is not remotely my personality type.

And, that didn't just manifest in creative space. It was in a lot of spaces where I was the assumed fat friend. People didn't understand that their fatphobia feeds into the nature of their anti-blackness. And so, specifically with the song "Symphony," that's a really kind of like, I'm being loved on song. In full recognition that people my hue and my build are not the center of rom coms habitually, and so there's an element of resistance in writing a reality where you're being aggressively loved on.

I would start these groups, I call them starter groups. And the idea of forming them was exclusively because, I play a little guitar, but the things that I can imagine are way beyond what I can play on a gazillion instruments. And I need to find someone to help me translate what's in my head.

And so, the starter team was like a way of making sure that we could get into my brain and figure out what the hell's going on in there. I would take what I call a nugget, and it's a voice note, that's a nugget.

I was going, “ha pu chu ho / ha pu chu ho / do di ba mi ho hi / ho hi / ha”, I'm not even doing all the words yet. I'm just doing vowels. “Ho hi / ho hi”. And so I took it to this duo called The PRVLG, Christopher and Christian, to do a pre-demo. And we're not trying to finish it. We're just trying to get the spirit.

Christopher and Christian are twins. And they're great. They were coming through Nashville and we found this studio downtown, rented this space. And so one hopped on the drums,

*(drumbeat)*

the other one hopped on bass, and they just start letting down that bassline, that,

“boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.”

*(“Symphony” by YOLA - pre-demo drums and bass)*

And I was like, okay, so we're already in!

*(Vocals: “I'll put you on / I'll put you on / To this body of mine / Of mine / Of mine / Of mine / Oh my”)*

Hrishikesh: So you have this hook and, okay, this is an idea for a song. What is this song about? Did you already know?

Yola: Yeah, I did. That hook, that “I'll put you on to this body of mine” is very kind of, like, presumptive. It's very like, “Congratulations, you've won the competition of access to these titties!” And like (laughs), it's very like, “Congratulations, you've won the competition, you get to smash this bitch.” Like, it's very, it's very like that, you know?

In this moment, I talk a lot in production terms. I'll be like, “Oh, I really visualize a kind of Parliament-Funkadelic style stacked vocal”, and the idea is to try and extricate the spirit to make sure that we don't miss anything. We don't need to do any more frills outside of that, but if we, we need to do everything that is necessary to get the spirit right.

*(Vocals: “Oh how you make me sing / Oh the joy the revelation that you bring”)*

I purposefully leave space for perspective because I want to collaborate. I love it. It's my favorite part.

And then that's when I show it to Sean and Zach.

Sean: My name's Sean Douglas and I work with a great writer, producer, Zach Skelton, and, very often. And he and I were both big fans of the stuff Yola had put out and, didn't know where she was musically at the time, but just had a hang. And she's obviously, like, insanely talented. Like, Yola brought in these seeds of songs. And a lot of them bore this sort of frustration or complications of old relationships. And, and this one really stood out because it was really visceral and it felt overtly, in your body, and felt overtly positive.

I do remember it was a few days in, it must have been a few days into us working together because I remember being much more comfortable with the idea that, like, Zach and I heard this thing, this amazing verse and this bassline that is like super catchy in and of itself. It was an interesting, to sort of like take a couple of days and sort of figure out the, what exactly you wanted to do because it wasn't anything you had done before.

Yola: No. Especially with a celebration song like this, you have to explain the rest of it. Like what are you even, you're going to put someone onto your body? Like what? That's not even a thing people say.

Sean: (chuckles)

Yola: And so you have to, you have to kind of deconstruct, why is this important?

Sean: Yes.

Yola: Because, you know, people don't center, you know, the fat black femme in a romantic guise, in a way that's highly celebratory and highly sex positive and highly valued and that's what this song is.

And it's not very often that I meet people who can get out of the way of their own agenda for long enough to hear what's in my head. Especially people of stature, writing-wise. And so that's something that is mad rare and I'm mad grateful to Sean for.

Sean: Yeah. That's very nice.

Yola: Like, it's a good-ass time.

Sean: Yeah. You, me, and Zach, we lucked out with a kind of that, that mind meld, yeah.

Yola: The mind meld!

Sean: We started working on it at Zach Skelton's studio over here in West Hollywood.

She came to us with the bassline and that, that melody.

Yola: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Sometimes when there's material that's been started before, you know, you'll pull up stems, and start writing off of,

Yola: We did.

Hrishikesh: The elements that were already there?

*("Symphony" by YOLA - bass)*

Sean: To make it kind of easier to work on, Zach pulled the stems into his session, and then Zach added this breakbeat.

*(add breakbeat)*

Hrishikesh: One of my favorite parts, one of the things I love in this song is this guy:

*(short vocal sample)*

Sean: Oh yeah.

Yola: That's Zach.

Sean: Yeah. That little vocal sample is one of the first things Zach added to the little stems once he pulled them in. If you grew up on like hip hop things and DJ premier beats and things like that, you, you just want a cool vocal sample. It just gives the whole thing some muscle. So then, we were kind of looping that verse, and kind of singing the verse part over that.

*(Vocals: "Oh, how you make me sing / Oh, the joy, the revelation that you bring / There ain't nothing better than this / Just being in the warmth of your embrace")*

So you're in the groove and then riding this bassline and you sort of build up all this tension. You're not going anywhere harmonically different. You know, you're sitting in that pocket, which feels really good.

Yola: Mm-hmm.

Sean: I was on the Rhodes.

*(Rhodes)*

And we can just play in that same tempo.

So once you do that for, you know, 16 bars, you're going to want to stretch and, and go to this, you know, bigger sort of chordal moment.

*("Symphony" by YOLA - Rhodes chorus chord progression)*

I started playing that progression. I was like, we can get a little poppier here. And she was super down for that.

Yola: I felt like when you started playing those chords, I started hearing a reacting melody.

Sean: And we just dove in and got this big soul chorus out of it.

*(Vocals: "Where we're going we can't come back / Feel the tempo, just like that / Play my heartstrings, oh, with both of your hands / And I'll sing like a symphony / Sing like a symphony / For you, yeah")*

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Yola and Sean Douglas continues after this.

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So, the three of you made this demo in Zach's studio. Did you have a plan for what you were going to do with it after that?

Yola: Yeah. We then go into Gold-Diggers and record a bunch of stuff. And it was very much a testing situation of like, do I need to do a live session?

I'm going to have to do one to find out whether that's what I want to do. Because this is my first time since being in the country that I've had the opportunity to do it.

Sean: In Gold-Diggers studio, we got all the live guys playing for a couple of days. Get live takes. And it was just so fun to do 'cause it's just not the norm for me.

*("Symphony" by YOLA - live drums)*

Yola: A drummer that I really rate and he was just an absolute beast: Howard Artis. We toured together for years. Really stunning player. I was like, he's 100 percent the drummer.

*("Symphony" by YOLA - bass)*

So Divinity Roxx. Bass player. You might know her from, I don't know, Beyoncé. (laughs) I was like, I want her fingers doing the magic on this particular bass line.

Sean: Yeah. And she did an amazing job of uh, you know, that bend. It's so specific in the demo that, to get the same feel for the live recording was kind of, I didn't think we would get it. I thought we'd honestly go back to the, to the other one, but she crushed.

Yola: She crushed.

So that was, like, the foundation of what the beginning of like, the live session idea is that I was really close to some real monsters. (laughs) Some real badasses.

*(Group vocals: "Go / Back / Feel / That / Heart / Hands")*

Hrishikesh: Who's singing there?

Yola: Oh my goodness gracious.

If you speak to anyone that's ever played in a live band of mine, they'll tell you I've got a problem with putting mics in front of everyone's faces. I'm like, everyone's singing! I love a group vocal.

*(Group vocals: "Sing like a symphony / Sing like a symphony")*

This is when I get into my vocal biomechanics lecturing bag

So specifically, vocally, I asked for a mezzo soprano vocal with a lot of low formant in the voice. And then I asked for a soprano singer with a lot of soft palate resonance.

Hrishikesh: And when the backing vocalists were recording their parts, were you in the room with them? Were you singing along with them?

Yola: No...

Hrishikesh: Or were you in the control room?

Yola: I was in the control room pointing and waving and that was my time to, to run the session. When vocals come in, then I'm producer.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Yola: And then when guitars or keys come in, then Sean's producer, when another instrument comes in, Zach's producer, but that was a moment where they looked at me and went, "This is literally what you lectured. Do it."

*(Group vocals: "Just take your time / Just take your time / I will not break your heart / Your heart / Your heart / Oh no")*

Sean: Yola got hyper specific with them about intonation and the sort of phrasing of it. And it's amazing how much that changes the way it comes through.

Yola: And like, singing that is like a diaphragm workout. When we were tracking the BGV's, remember, and I was like in front of the glass with like my gut fully out, okay, like belly button on show situation, and I'm literally going if I don't see diaphragmatic hits, you're not sitting this right. I need to see guts move.

*(Group vocals: "Just take your time / Just take your time / I will not break your heart")*

You can't really do the vocal if you're not doing the big hits.

*(Group vocals: "Your heart / Oh no / Chills up my spine / Chills up my spine / You make the music start / And start / And start / Go on")*

The hook is really tight, like, staccato and syncopated. It needed something that was the antithesis of that. And so, we needed a big "ta-dah."

*(Horn chords)*

Sean: I felt like once we got to the horn stacks, the whole song feels... just physical. Once you've got there, you start to go, "Oh yeah, this is like a record."

*(Lead vocals and group vocals together, with full instrumental)*

*(Vocals: "Go / Back / Feel / That / Heart / Hands / And I'll sing like a symphony / I'll sing like a symphony")*

Yola: When I used to be on tour, kind of in my Bugz in the Attic era, We were doing this festival in Australia called Good Vibrations Festival, and we were opening for James Brown, no less. And I'd see him for about a month. We'd all sit together. And I feel like the outro of "Symphony," you'll hear me go, "Whoah!"

*(James Brown-style outro vocals: "Whoah! / Yeah / Oh yeah")*



Then I go into “Your love, your love / Give me / Your love, your love, your love”.

*(House-style vocals: Your love, your love, your love / Your love, your love, your love / Your love / Give me / Your love, your love, your love / Your love, your love, your love / Your love, your love, your love / Your love, your love, your love)*

That wouldn't be out of place on a house tune.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Yola: ‘Cause that was my other bread and butter. I was the house vocal for DJ producers on lots and lots of house tunes. And all of that history, this song is piecing together. Sonically, all the different parts of my life, like, vocally, they are snapshots right the way through.

Sean: I remember we were in Gold-Diggers studio, and she would, you know, knock out her leads in, like, three takes.

*(Vocals: “Oh, how you make me sing / Oh, the joy, the revelation that you bring”)*

Which, for me and Zach working in more pop-leaning stuff, is like a rarity. But such a luxury.

And she just crushes it. And you go, “Oh, that’s awesome.”

*(strings)*

The engineers and, and me and Zach were just kind of like looking through the glass into the booth and just kind of, jaws on the floor moment. It was crazy.

*(Vocals: “Play my heartstrings with both of your hands / And I'll sing like a symphony / I'll sing like a symphony”)*

Yola: I love collaborating. I love being part of a team. And so, that's what led me to these songs of celebration and just a little bit of introspection on my situation. I feel like this song really encapsulates the joy of mind melds. And it's kind of like about finding my partner Henry here. And a mind meld of a different kind. And so, yeah. The kind of lyrics of this song are very like luxuriating in this kind of smugness of finding someone. But I wrote it before I met him. I wrote it to manifest him.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Sean: (chuckles)

Yola: And then he turned up and he was exactly this song.

And that was it.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Symphony" by Yola, in its entirety.

*("Symphony" by YOLA)*

Visit [songexploder.net/yola](http://songexploder.net/yola) to learn more, and to find links to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced by me, along with Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith and Mary Dolan, and production assistant Tiger Biskup. Special thanks to Christian and Christopher Underwood from The PRVLG for their help. 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.