

**Song Exploder**  
**MJ Lenderman - You Don't Know The Shape I'm In**  
**Episode 290**

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.

Jake Lenderman plays and records under the name MJ Lenderman. He put out his first album in 2019. In addition to his solo work, he's been a member of the band Wednesday, and he's also featured on the Waxahatchee hit song, "Right Back to It". In September 2024, the fourth MJ Lenderman album came out. It's called *Manning Fireworks*. The New Yorker named it the best album of the year, and Stereogum, Rolling Stone and Pitchfork all put it in their top ten. For this episode, I talked to Jake about one of the songs from that album, called "You Don't Know the Shape I'm In." The song itself took shape in a few different ways. Coming up, you'll hear the way the song started as a demo, and then how that got fleshed out, and then how it got rebuilt, and then how Jake completely reimagined the whole thing.

*("You Don't Know The Shape I'm In" by MJ LENDERMAN)*

*(Vocals: "You don't know the shape I'm in / You don't know")*

Jake: I turned 21, February 2020. And then I had a very, like, creative and prolific COVID time. But once touring came back, we really started hitting it hard, and I hadn't really written much for months.

And I was like, when am I gonna have two months to not do anything again? I was kind of expecting this to happen. Then time kept going on and on, and I realized that's not how life really works.

So I kind of got out of the groove with writing. I guess I was more disciplined when I had all that time. That's kind of where I was at when I started this song.

Hrishikesh: Where was that?

Jake: Asheville, North Carolina.

Hrishikesh: Were you living on your own?

Jake: No, I was living with Karly. It was just the two of us. And, uh, it was a really small house.

I was feeling, like, down or something, about not creating as much. But to keep

some sort of creative muscle and to get some reps in, and practice listening and reacting and stuff, I would just set, like, a drum loop on my laptop.

*(demo v1 drum loop)*

Jake: That loop, on the original demo, is the Patterning app on my phone. It's a really nice, just, drum machine app.

I like working at night. You know, it was probably like 2am. Karly was probably asleep in the other room, and I would just kind of DI guitar into my laptop. Being as quiet as possible. (chuckles)

*(add guitar)*

And just kind of jam with myself. No click or anything. Just played to the drum machine.

There's like a guitar that comes in. It's got a little bit of phaser on it, and it's just the two highest strings doing this repetitive thing.

And so I played that to the drum machine for like 20 minutes.

And then, once I was done with that, just started over again with a new guitar.

*(add 4-string guitar)*

Hrishikesh: Was there something that you were aiming for in your head? Like, "Oh, today I wanna make a song that has this feeling"?

Jake: Yeah, for sure. I think I really love repetition and I made a lot of different instrumental stuff around this time that was all very repetitive and long. And I guess the goal was maybe to get into a zone that was kind of trance-like, and kind of made you forget where you are.

I like music that you don't realize, like, maybe how long something is. It's like a form of meditation or something.

*(add snare drum)*

Hrishikesh: Did you add drums on top of the uh, drum machine?

Jake: I did. I played a snare drum. Just a snare. I only had like one mic in my house, but the, yeah, that snare added a lot.

And, like I said, it was partially an exercise, just, like, wanting to jam, but being by myself.

And, the way I did that was just to, uh, first-take each track and go back to the beginning and play 20 minutes every time with each instrument and just try to be present and try to practice restraint.

And, uh, just listen to what else is going on.

Hrishikesh: So if you're doing that for all of these instruments at like 20 minutes a time, you, you must've been there for a pretty long time.

Jake: Yeah. That's kind of the danger of working alone. I start having fun, and then it's five in the morning and I've tracked nine guitars.

*(cont. demo v1 instrumental)*

Hrishikesh: At the end of all the, recording all those instruments, what was your feeling about the thing that you had made?

Jake: I was probably, maybe a little confused. I, it doesn't really sound like anything else that I'd made before.

And, at this time, I didn't think it would be a song with lyrics or anything, or even a song. It was just a little exercise for myself. But I guess I kept listening to it.

And eventually I got asked to do this compilation called *Through the Soil*.

And separately, I had lyrics that were all scattered, like nothing really together. But then I chopped it down into like a five minute section and figured out how to sing over it.

And then I ended up really liking the song. (chuckles)

*(Vocals: "We sat under a half mast McDonald's flag / Broken birds tumble fast past my window / And you don't know the shape I'm in")*

Hrishikesh: Tell me about the lyrical fragments that you had. Where did those come from?

Jake: One of the writing exercises I kind of would practice would be just going to, like, a coffee shop or something and writing in 20 lines that weren't really connected to anything. So some of 'em came from there. I think the first lyric I probably had was about the "half mast McDonald's flag". That was something I remember seeing on, like, the New Jersey turnpike, on tour. It was a funny image. It was

kind of sad.

Hrishikesh: Were these writing exercises happening around the same time as you were doing these instrumental exercises?

Jake: I guess so, yeah. But separately.

Hrishikesh: I think it's cool that you had that kind of discipline. I think it's one thing to say, oh, I want to stay in the groove, even when you don't have songs, but it's another thing to actually sit down and do that.

Jake: Yeah. I always have to remind myself that one of the harder parts about just wanting to sit down and write is that 99% of it's gonna be garbage. And I don't always have it in me to interface with that. Like, even if I'm alone, I'm, like, embarrassed. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jake: But yeah, I think the main job, not even writing, is more about clearing, uh, my brain and shutting off voices that say an idea's stupid before it comes out.

Hrishikesh: I wanna go back to the "McDonald's flag". You said that that was one of the first things and you found it funny. Is that a quality that you're actively looking for, for your songs?

Jake: Yeah, definitely. I think it's safe to say pretty much all my songs start with something that makes me laugh. That's kind of what gets me excited.

Hrishikesh: Has that always been the case?

Jake: Not necessarily. I think that was kind of a switch that started around 2019 for me.

Hrishikesh: Where do you think that came from?

Jake: My music before that had been really serious and, uh, personal and autobiographical kind of, and sad. That was kind of the one mood there.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Jake: And so I got pretty bored with that. And learning that I can just make stuff up, and I can write a song where the narrator's a bad guy or something, it opens up so many doors, and humor has been a really important thing to me.

I was watching the, like, nineties Hulk cartoon.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) Okay...

Jake: (laughs) And I don't know what it was about this episode. I was just cooking once I started watching. Like, most of the lyrics came out of watching that. Like, "All you had to do was be nice."

'Cause you know, people were just bullying the Hulk and he would get angry (chuckles) and start destroying things. And so like, the, the violent side, there's like a bit of violence in this song. That was inspired by the Hulk.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. Are there other lyrics that came from that show?

Jake: I think the clarinet thing, just kinda, it was, you know, maybe a scene of a guy just kind of defeated walking in the rain with a solo clarinet.

*(Vocals: "The clarinet singing its lonesome duck walk")*

So "The clarinet singing its lonesome duck walk" was kind of a reference to, literally, the Hulk.

Hrishikesh: As you were writing these things, what's the story of this song in your mind?

Jake: Once I started organizing the lyrics, I realized they have something in common. It could be a friendship or a romantic relationship, but it's kind of about two people drifting.

Hrishikesh: Can I ask you, like, who are they? Like, what do they look like in your mind, the people who the song's about?

Jake: That's an interesting question.

Hrishikesh: Is one of them you or a stand-in for you, you think?

Jake: Maybe. There are definitely elements of it that are.

Hrishikesh: What's the most personal part of the song for you?

Jake: Probably the opening line. Just thinking about certain relationships, certain friendships, people change over time, and it's not always anybody's fault if you drift.

And it doesn't require some sort of confrontation or fight or something. It just kind of happens.

Hrishikesh: What do you feel when you listen to that demo now?

Jake: I still really like it. I like the energy of it, just, like, the first-take-ness of it. But that kinda led to problems later when I tried to redo it in the studio, I just couldn't capture it again.

Hrishikesh: Coming up, Jake talks about the trap he fell into in the studio, and how he got out of it.

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Hrishikesh: So, once you put out the song on that compilation, were you still thinking about it? Like, "Okay, that's not the end of this story for this song"?

Jake: Yeah, I wasn't totally sure what I would do with it. But, when I started working on the album that became *Manning Fireworks*, I went back into the studio to try to record it, like, professionally.

Hrishikesh: Was it just you again?

Jake: Yeah, just me, and Alex Farrar was engineering and co-produced the album with me. And this was like the first session we did.

I just kind of tried to re-record the song, and I just couldn't really figure it out.

Hrishikesh: In what way?

Jake: The guitar parts are really simple, but I don't think I could ever play them again. Because I was doing weird things with tunings that I probably never wrote down or was never able to figure out again and like getting the same shapes and stuff'd be pretty impossible now.

Hrishikesh: And it was like three in the morning, a year earlier.

Jake: (chuckles) Yeah, exactly. So yeah, we got this version recorded.

*(demo v2 vocals: "Some say distance grows the heart / But I know sometimes we just drift apart / Everybody's walking in twos / Leaving Noah's ark")*

But it just didn't have the same spark to it, I guess.

*("It's Sunday at the water park")*

Hrishikesh: How long did it take for you to come to that realization that, like, this version wasn't working for you?

Jake: Within the week of getting the mix back. I mean, even in the studio I wasn't really feeling great about the music and just starting to feel some sort of imposter syndrome.

Because like, that was December, 2022. I released *Boat Songs* April that year, and randomly in December it got really, like, a lot of attention.

Hrishikesh: Mmm.

Jake: And so I was kind of distracted by people talking about it.

Hrishikesh: Why would that make things harder to make more music?

Jake: I don't know. I think it was just, the attention was new, and something to get used to, and so, yeah, I was doing my best to not try to make something that I would think the people who liked the album would want to hear, or something.

Because in reality, the reason I think people connected with the music in the first place is because I was doing what I wanted to do and being myself.

Hrishikesh: You weren't being self-conscious, and now suddenly you were self-conscious about how people were responding to a moment where you weren't self-conscious?

Jake: Yeah, exactly. So yeah, I was just doing my best to mentally get back into a place where I could just do my thing.

Hrishikesh: Which feels, it's like someone saying like, "don't think of an elephant".

Jake: Yeah. (chuckles) So, after that session, I thought on it for a long time and just realized, like, the only way to do this and make it fresh and exciting again is to just totally rebuild it.

I wanted the record to be dynamic. And I thought originally that maybe I needed to make songs that were heavier, louder, faster.

But then I was like, what if I just go the opposite way? Acoustic, quiet.

*("You Don't Know The Shape I'm In" by MJ LENDERMAN - acoustic guitar)*

I asked my friend Landon, I knew he plays upright bass, and that was gonna be a core part of the song.

*(add upright bass)*

We did have a drum machine loop again.

*(add drum machine)*

Alex actually played drums on top of the drum machine.

Hrishikesh: Had you practiced this before you went into the studio? Like, did you, at home, sit with an acoustic guitar and, and try imagining this song in a quieter format? Like, how did you know that this was gonna be a good idea?

Jake: I guess... I don't know if I even tried playing it by myself. I knew it would work because it was completely different. It wasn't trying to recreate something.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Jake: And so, me and Landon and Alex tracked it live. Even with the vocals.

*(add vocals: "We sat...")*

And that's how it started. Just that core.

*(Vocals: "...under a half mast McDonald's flag / Broken birds tumble fast past my window / And you don't know the shape I'm in")*

Hrishikesh: What was your first reaction to what you'd just done?

Jake: It started flipping the switch in my head about how I was feeling about the record in general. I got really excited. I remember just like, I loved how the bass sounded so much, and I felt like we kind of unlocked something.

But one of the main obstacles or, like, challenges was, like, I felt like it was a little bit twee or something, initially.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Jake: There just needed to be some more dirt there. Like, it needed to be a little more unsettling or something. And that's where that slide banjo came in.

*("You Don't Know The Shape I'm In" by MJ LENDERMAN - slide banjo)*



That's my friend Colin. He's actually the drummer in my band, but he discovered this thing.

If you take a banjo, and put an EBow on it, and play it with a slide.

The EBow just, like, causes the string to vibrate, and with the banjo, 'cause it's got a drum head on it, there's some really interesting resonance there.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, when I was listening to the stems, I was trying to figure out what the hell that was.

Jake: (chuckles) It really shines through at one moment, after the "punching holes in the hotel room" line.

*(cont. slide banjo)*

*(Vocals: "Punching holes...")*

It really sticks out in a beautiful way.

*(Vocals: "... in a hotel room / Singing all you had to do was be nice")*

And then I took some elements from the original. There's like a clean electric guitar strumming that's kind of reminiscent of the original demo.

*(add clean electric guitar)*

But then the funny part was, the day I was going in to record, my friend Shane was walking out of a session and he was holding, like, a case and I was like, "What's in there?" And he was like, "a clarinet". And I was like, "Oh, okay. Can you come back tomorrow?" Like, cause I had that lyric and I was like, that might be funny if an actual clarinet responds to me singing about one.

*(clarinet and vocals: "Clarinet singing its lonesome duck walk")*

So that was never really like a plan. It just, we ran into each other and that's how that happened. I love how it sounds.

*(clarinet)*

Hrishikesh: What are the other vocals on the song, besides yours?

*(Jake and Karly vocals: "And you don't know...")*

Jake: That's Karly singing.

*(Karly vocals: "...the shape I'm in")*

I like the way Karly and my voice sound together. We've sang a lot together, being in Wednesday and, you know, she's been in my band at various times

*(cont. Karly vocals: "Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh")*

There's like a weird noisy guitar that kind of feeds back and with the wah-wah pedal.

*(distorted guitar)*

Hrishikesh: Yeah. How did you make that?

Jake: I was in the room with, like, a Marshall half stack, and it's, like, feeding back. And then just using the wah as almost a rhythmic tool. It's just on the quarter notes the whole time. I just eventually found this dissonant riff.

I felt like the violence in this song wasn't really coming through and I think maybe these more dissonant elements bring that out.

Hrishikesh: So when you recorded the song at this volume and tempo, and with this instrumentation, did it end up changing or recontextualizing the lyrics for you?

Jake: I think so. It's a little more somber, I guess. The humor, you know, like sadness and humor are the same thing, a lot of the time.

Hrishikesh: How so?

Jake: Just like, what is funny is what's sad, I guess. They're like, depending on how you're looking at, like the McDonald's flag or, like, punching holes in a hotel room, like, it's kind of violent and scary, but it's pathetic. 'Cause then the character says, "All you had to do was be nice," and then sings this "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Be nice." It's kinda like, it's pathetic.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, there's something even more pathetic about violence that's ineffectual.

JAKE: Yeah. And it's not necessarily directed at anyone, I don't think. Because part of the song is like, there's no blame anywhere. But yeah, this frustrated character doesn't know where to put that energy.

*(Vocals: "Singing all you had to do was be nice / Whoa, whoa, whoa, be nice to me")*

Hrishikesh: What about the title of the song and the refrain of, "You don't know the shape I'm in?"

Jake: I'm glad you brought that up. The Band has a song called "The Shape I'm In," and that's the chorus: "Oh, you don't know the shape I'm in." I just love that statement.

Like, I see these two characters in the song, like, both saying that. And not really fully being able to, to be there. I, I know it's common, like, or at least for me, I've dealt with this in relationships or friendships and stuff. Like, sometimes you're both in a place where you need somebody there for you, but maybe they're also, they also need that.

Hrishikesh: I feel like with great songs, you can do them a lot of different ways and they'll still be great songs, but it's also hard not to feel like sometimes, one particular arrangement is, like, these are the clothes that this song should be wearing. The album version is so different from the demo. For you, did you feel like oh, based on what the chords are and what the melody and the lyrics are, this is what this song should sound like?

Jake: Yeah, I think like the, uh, like, I like how you said "clothes" that the album version wears, feels more fitting to the overall nature of the song but I love that both of these exist. And that they're so different.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "You Don't Know the Shape I'm In", by MJ Lenderman, in its entirety.

*("You Don't Know the Shape I'm In" by MJ Lenderman)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "You Don't Know the Shape I'm In," and you can watch the music video. There's also a link to the original version of the song that appeared on the Through The Soil compilation.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith and Mary Dolan, with production assistance from Tiger 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.

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