

**Song Exploder**  
**Jack Harlow - Say Hello**  
**Episode 311**

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.

Jack Harlow is from Louisville, Kentucky, and started performing and releasing music in 2015, when he was in high school. In 2020, he released his first album, which went double platinum. He was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap Performance. He's had multiple number one hits across his first three albums. And for his fourth album, *Monica*, which just came out in March 2026, he switched things up dramatically. And I was curious how and why. How did someone who had so much success as a rapper approach a new way of making music? So, for this episode, I spoke to Jack Harlow about the song "Say Hello," which is the closing track on *Monica*.

*("Say Hello" by JACK HARLOW)*

*(Vocals: "Ooh, woah / Ooh, woah, say hello, ooh, woah / Ooh, woah, say hello, ooh, woah")*

Jack: My name's Jack Harlow.

I was working on a different album for two years after *Jackman*, my last one, and it was good, but I didn't think it was exciting or surprising. It just wasn't distinct enough. And it also felt like something I'd done before, which, you know, repeating yourself is boring. And I was getting more and more frustrated and I was dreading going to the studio.

And you know, as soon as recording becomes work, you're in trouble, I think. Not that there's no work ethic involved. Of course sometimes you have to grind it out. But when you're trying to get inspired and it feels like labor, that's something to take as a sign. So, finally I just took three weeks off.

I remember talking about it with my engineer right before I took that three week break and sort of having to reconcile it in front of him. Almost a little embarrassed, saying, "Yeah, man, you know, I just gotta think." And he said it out loud for me. I was already thinking it, but he put it really well. He's like, "I think you just need to choose a North Star that is distinct and definitive."

So, I took a lot of walks. You know, I think part of the reason I was dreading going to the studio is, I had just moved to New York, and I would look out the occasional window I might have in a studio. I'd go outside and I'd say, wow, I'd rather be out here than be in there recording.

And so I decided to think about, what do I actually want to do? What am I listening to? What does my ear crave? I've always been attracted to melody, and I listen to a lot of melodic music. I find I prefer melodic music, and I think there's something so timeless and emotional about melody.

A lot of my early stuff had a lot more melody involved. And then it's almost like I found my rap tone, and I was getting such a great response from it, and it became something I could lean on so consistently that I think I got further and further away from melody.

But the genre of neo soul as a whole was super influential to me. Just how pleasant it was. So I wanted something that, in 20 years, I'll still like the sound of.

*(beat loop - Rhodes)*

About three years ago, I first caught wind of Aksel Arvid, a loop maker from Norway. And there's a lot of loop makers in hip hop that are over in Europe that are almost faceless to the rest of the industry and just send loops through email to big name producers. So, to me, he was another one of those and he was talented, but I didn't know much more about him.

And he worked with my longtime friend and collaborator 2forwOyNE, who I grew up with. But he introduced me to Aksel and brought him to Kentucky for the first time. And he was just somebody I met in passing. And we had a couple songs that we worked on together. And then sometime in 2024, my little brother, Clay Harlow, who is a producer too, he's on this album. And he became closer with Aksel as well. And he asked, could he bring Aksel to a session?

So, Aksel came around, and we started to get to know each other, and we started to realize there were parallels in our interests and our natures. He and I bonded over R&B. We were attracted to similar melodies and sounds. So he became the clear go-to guy and executive producer for me.

I could tell you a few of the rules that we followed. You know, I think rules are so, so wonderful to end up somewhere specific. And I'd say the number one, when Aksel first got to New York, the first thing I said after those three weeks of deliberating were, I don't wanna make anything with braggadocio, or overt egoism. You know, I wanna make something that I think can age really well. And I was, at the time, in the mindset of, ego is weighing down the quality of the music as it gets older. So, I was interested in no braggadocio.

I was interested in only being melodic. So, singing, the whole time.

No cursing. Curse words can be a crutch sometimes. They can also be exciting and add a punctuation to things, but that's not what I was looking for this time. I like the challenge, as a writer, of not having any crutches.

And then all the instruments, we eventually decided, had to be live. Except for the drums. The drums could be programmed, to keep it hip hop.

*(beat loop - programmed drums)*

But, you know, no synths coming outta the computer. The bass, the guitar, horns, strings, everything had to be live.

So those were some of the things we lived by. And we knew we'd end up somewhere.

Of the songs that made the album, "Say Hello" is the earliest. I showed up to the studio and Aksel played this beat:

*(full beat loop)*

Made up at the time of Jermaine Paul's bass notes, Aksel on Rhodes, and he had done the drums as well.

And he just played me the beat. I just sat there with shades on, for 20 minutes, listening to it, just steeping myself in it.

You know, I was very moody in these sessions. I think the stakes felt high to me. I'd just scrapped an album, and I cared a lot about how this was gonna end up. And I don't think moodiness is the best response, but I'm a naturally moody person. And sometimes I'd walk in there and just, I'd just need a second to warm up, socially. And this was one of those days where I walked in a little moody and sometimes I just wanna listen to the beat. I don't wanna talk about what I think of it, or how it got made. I just want to hear it for a while.

And I think this was one of those days where I just wanted to let it play, but I immediately was like, oh, this feels Slum Village. This feels Outkast. This just feels like part of the music I love. It felt very in line with the reason I started this project as a whole.

And so I knew as soon as I heard it, I was like, okay, there's something here.

*(beat loop out)*

And then we started playing with melodies. The first few weeks of this album

when we were still figuring out what it was, I was recording on almost everything he played. Because I didn't wanna be too rigid about what I thought it should be, or how I wanted it to sound.

So despite the moodiness I was describing, there was a general optimism and openness to everything I was hearing, because I just wanted to see where we might land, and we could filter it later. We can decide where we're going later. But this was still when I was in a zone of, let's try it.

I mean, a lot of these songs were made just with taking the SM 7 out, holding it in my hand and just doing what feels good, which was a relatively new process for me. Something that I've been avoiding the last few years. I've been so, statement first, lyrics first, that I think I've missed out, or just neglected the improvisational nature of just playing with melody and making it nonsensical to start. And that's how this song started, was kind of nonsensical and just finding a melody that felt good.

*(gibberish singing early demo)*

I would lay down a melody for four bars that I really liked, and I would say, while I'm still flowing, let me move on to a different melody. All different melodies of just word vomit.

*(gibberish singing early demo)*

And sometimes while you're scattin' the melody, a word will come to you. Sometimes you find words that lock right into place. And that's when it feels really good. You don't feel like you're compromising. You feel like it's you and the universe cooking something up.

*(Vocals: "Maybe I'll get at you when my life gets slow")*

The first line, "Maybe I'll get at you when my life gets slow." As soon as I said that, I was like, okay, I kind of know what this could be about. Because I've expressed that sentiment before, or at least thought that sentiment in my head.

Like, we don't have to, this doesn't have to be a right now thing, but maybe when things slow down, it'll align. And maybe it won't! It's not just my decision. It's not just me saying, when things slow down for me, I'll be available for you. It's, maybe you'll be available. Maybe I will. Maybe the stars will align. It's that sentiment.

*(Vocals: "But one day I'll be walkin' by the place you stay, ooh, woah")*

It felt like a mosaic of memories. I feel like I've had a good amount of stop-and-starts with people that... it wasn't negative, it didn't end in an ugly way, but sometimes you begin something and the timing isn't right. But there's still a positive feeling. You still like something about them. You know, it's, you're not dumping them, they're not dumping you. It's just, huh, this doesn't seem to make sense for us right now.

*(Vocals: "Maybe I'll get at you when my life gets slow")*

Up to this point, my vocal has been this singular, laidback, sometimes monotonous, rap vocal. And, you know, I didn't want to just make new music. I wanted to be heard in a way I've never been heard. And I, it thrills me that a few of these songs people have to ask, "Is that you?" Because I think it's exciting to access new parts of your voice and stretch yourself.

*(Vocals: "I'm missin' you and the shape of ya / I'll visit you when the day comes / I'm givin' up control, I'm givin' up control of you / (You know I want you back, you knew I'd come runnin' back) / (Sometimes I)")*

In my head, there's only so many sweet spots in my voice. And when I find the sweet spot, whatever notes those are, whatever octave it is, that's what I can accomplish on this song. And you know, this album was not about showing people how good of a singer I am. It was about showing people my choice and curation.

I'm not looking to show people, "Oh my God, he's actually an incredible singer." I'm looking to show people I can make music that sounds really good. And whatever way I get there is the best way I get there. But I wanted to make something that was less about my talent being on display and more my taste.

*(Vocals: "Ooh, woah, say hello, say hello")*

I mean, I remember early in my career wanting to make a commercial splash, and almost looking down on stuff that wasn't taking enough of a risk to be commercial. So now I find myself on the other end of the pendulum, saying, well, I'm more interested in making this type of music right now.

There's things I'm still driven by. There's things I'm still insecure about. You know, I still have a, a status anxiety from time to time, like anyone that's trying to climb. I would love to catch a smash off of this album, but that's not why I made it.

Hrishikesh: More with Jack Harlow after this.

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Jack: So like I said, I come up with all these melodies without troubling myself at all about the words.

And then we go into puzzle piece mode and say, cool, let's actually do some of the work, the labor of piecing these together. And I know a lot of artists that hate the lyrics part. You know, that's why so many artists work with writers, because they want all of music, they want their whole career to be instinct. And I, I relate to that, but I enjoy language enough that I enjoy the puzzle-piecing of lyrics. And it does get frustrating sometimes. But I like both sides.

*(Vocals: "I'll be understanding if you change your name")*

"I'll be understanding if you change your name." If you get married, I get it.

*(Vocals: "Maybe you prefer to live a life you know")*

With my career I end up meeting women that... they live a life that is totally unlike mine, and maybe is a little slower and more stable. And it's me essentially saying, "Maybe you would actually enjoy living the life that is familiar to you, and is more conventional than mine. And maybe that is what's best for you."

I definitely zeroed in on a poignant acceptance and melancholy over change, and how things change, and you know, the nostalgia of looking back on this time you shared with somebody, but accepting that it's a thing of the past. And who knows what the future holds? The emotion got more specific, and it gave all the musicians something to work with.

*(bass)*

Jermaine plays a, a six-string bass, and he would lay foundational stuff and then later come back and play something interactive on top of it.

*(piano)*

And then, Robert Glasper is playing all that piano. Robert and I had worked on some music before that never came out, so I brought him into the fold. But I'm such a minimalist by nature that sometimes I have to force myself to give things these richer details. And a lot of it was so jazzy that I, I had to grow used to it.

*(drums, Rhodes, bass, piano together)*

So the maximalism vs minimalism was a huge thing with this song, and there was a lot of conflict between me and Aksel over how much of this busy piano we were gonna keep.

*(piano)*

Because I definitely wanted Robert to make it a more rich, dynamic song. You know, we didn't want it to be this loop that had no moments of life. I think it's good to have moments in a song that occur once, as opposed to it looping like a machine. But it was definitely us having to find a balance because, you know, at the end of the day it was Aksel's job to get a certain level of complexity and musicality that was important to him across the line.

But my requirement I issued to him was: I enjoy minimalism, I enjoy simple, palatable music, and at the same time, I wanna be pushed outta my comfort zone. So it really came down to that test for him of, get as much complexity as you can across the line here without it disturbing my enjoyment.

And that was his, that in a lot of ways, that sums up his role for this album, to be honest.

*(horns)*

A fellow named Stéphane Clément came in during post-production and laced a good set of these songs with beautiful trumpet.

*(horns)*

My voice is so limited and my range is so limited, and you know, I don't think of myself as a very dynamic singer. I was looking for any opportunity to lift some of my melodies and make them breezier.

*(Ravyn vocals: "ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah ah")*

Ravyn Lenae is one of the best singers of our generation, in my opinion. I remember I saw her at a open mic in Atlanta in 2017, and was blown away at her voice, even back then. And I booked her for the Gazebo festival I threw in Louisville in 2024. So we actually met at the festival.

Sometimes you meet artists and you're like, cool, they're in their own world, like there's, there's not gonna be a lot of synergy. But sometimes you meet somebody and you're like, I don't know. There's an understanding here. And I

think we had that really early. There was a warmth between us. She came to New York and we hung out and talked about life and music, and became friends, in a real way.

And so by the time I was looking for some vocals, it felt like an organic way to stamp our friendship, to be honest. And so she came to Electric Lady and laid them right in front of me.

*(Ravyn vocals: "ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah ah")*

That's a melody she came up with on the spot. And then, impromptu, she was like, "Why don't you sing these, this, with me?" And so, you'll hear, she and I started singing together.

*(Ravyn and Jack vocals: "ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah, ah-ah-ah ah")*

Hrishikesh: There are these bird calls and nature sounds in the music, and I was wondering, where did that come from?

Jack: This is one of those things that was there from the beginning. It was part of the beat, and, you know, I love the park. And I wouldn't even call myself a nature guy. You know, I don't like going camping, I don't care to go on hikes, really. I'm not Mr. Nature. But I do like going to the park and I like how it makes me feel. And I think that captured that, and it captured how it feels to be outside in New York. It just felt right.

You don't always know how things are gonna end. But I hate to end anything on bad terms. I'd like for everything to end in a way that allows us to greet each other when we see each other. You know, it doesn't mean we have to go on another date. Doesn't mean we have to rekindle. But it would be nice if we can say hello to each other. It should be like, "Hey, how you doing?" Maybe I can give you a hug. And I think there's optimism to it that I, as a person, believe in.

I don't know if there's a song that sums up the theme of the album more than this song, to me, actually. There's something obscure about it, there's something more vague and impressionistic about it, that I don't know if I've accomplished in some of my other work.

I love the way we just kind of captured this loose, blurry feeling in a bottle.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Say Hello," by Jack Harlow, in its entirety.

*("Say Hello" by JACK HARLOW)*

Go to [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Say Hello."

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, and Kathleen Smith, 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.