

Song Exploder
The xx - Crystallised
Episode 313

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.

The xx formed in 2005, when they were still in high school. They signed to the UK label Young, and put out their first album in 2009. It won the prestigious Mercury Prize, and was named one of the best albums of the year by *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork* and more. And since then, *The Guardian* has named it one of the best albums of the 21st century. This year, the three band members, Romy Croft, Oliver Sim, and Jamie xx played together as The xx for the first time in 8 years. I spoke to them in between the weekends at Coachella, where they were opening their sets with the song "Crystallised." It's the first song they ever released, back in April 2009, when the lineup also included Baria Qureshi on guitar. I spoke to Romy, Jamie and Oliver, here at my studio, about how they first found each other, and how they made "Crystallised."

("Crystallised" by THE XX)

(Vocals: "Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh")

Jamie: I'm Jamie. I'm the producer and I do all the electronic stuff on stage.

Romy: I'm Romy and I play guitar, and I'm one of the songwriters, and I sing.

Oliver: And I'm Oliver. I play bass, I sing, and I'm the other songwriter.

Romy: Oliver and I met in nursery school, when we were three.

Oliver: And then we met Jamie when we were 11, the first day of school.

Jamie: I didn't know anybody else that came from my previous school. So I was on the hunt for some friends quickly, (chuckles) and I gravitated towards these two quite instantly. I just felt, like, some kind of similarity. Like a strangeness, probably, (laughs)

Romy and Oliver: (laughs)

Jamie: That I felt, I felt similar to.

Romy: This, this is wonderful, fascinating to hear this now.

Jamie and I used to go skateboarding together, and we used to watch a lot of skate videos together, and discovered a lot of amazing music. There was a video that Jamie showed me that had Portishead and Mazzy Star and The Cure. I think that was actually an amazing way of discovering music.

Jamie: And then, my uncles were DJs. So I inherited my decks when I was 10 years old, playing records, playing my parents' records. And then I learnt about the sampling of those records, and all of that.

Oliver: We didn't really start making music together. Like, we started independently. Jamie was making his solo music, Romy was making hers, I was making mine.

Romy: It was just such a private, personal exploration, connecting with music. It was such, like, a shy, I remember a moment of us sitting together and I was like, "I like singing." And you were like, "I like singing."

Then, Oliver and I, we were kind of trying to, along with Baria, who was also in the band at the time, trying to, like, find a way to play live.

Oliver: We were gigging, me, Romy, and Baria, for quite a while.

Jamie: So, for a period of time I was watching these guys do it and going to the gigs.

Romy: Yeah, we begged Jamie. We said, please play drums in the band. Please play live drums. 'Cause we thought he was a great drummer.

Jamie: I didn't really know what to do, because I didn't wanna play drums on it, 'cause it sounded so good as it was. It wouldn't have worked, 'cause these guys were a lot quieter than they are now. You just wouldn't have been able to hear what was going on on stage if there was a live drum kit. That was one of my main things that was stopping me from doing that.

Romy: I'm really glad that Jamie said no at first, because it kind of forced Oliver and I to we, we figured out a way to make electronic drums, simplistic ones, first.

And I think because of the limitations, I mean, a lot of everything we'll say is, probably comes from limitations. You know, Oliver and I were like writing to electronic drums from the eight track that I had. It had, like, drum beats in it. So we sort of would use those, or I remember making some really simple drum beats on like a weird program on, do you remember, on my computer?

Jamie: Yeah, I remember that.

Romy: Do you remember, what is that program?

Jamie: It's called, like, Hammerhead or something.

Romy: Oh yeah.

Jamie: Very basic drum machine.

Romy: I really remember that. And then just, we had that, burnt it on a CD, and then we gave it to the sound person and said like, had to be like, "track three." And it would go like "1, 2, 3."

Eventually, we said to Jamie, please can you, like, help us and make some beats? So you made some beats and then, eventually...

Jamie: Eventually I went on stage and started playing the MPC.

Romy: Having Jamie play the MPC live in the band was a very big turning point in, of the fluidity of it being live-feeling, but still electronic.

(MPC live drum beat)

Jamie: An MPC is a music production center, that's what it stands for. And it is actually meant for making full tracks on them. Usually hip hop. But I never did that, 'cause I always just wanted to use it as a live tool. Playing it live, tapping the buttons.

Oliver: I think when we had started writing "Crystalised," we only had about four songs. You know, we were playing pub sets for about 20 to 25 minutes. And Jamie had just joined the band.

I remember the very, like, earliest demo was Romy and I playing two acoustic guitars.

(Photo Booth acoustic guitar demo)

It was in front of um, the program on Mac...

Romy: Photo Booth.

Oliver: Photo Booth. The most roundabout way to get-

Romy: It worked, though. We, like, filmed ourselves. There was the video and then you could extract the audio.

(more Photo Booth acoustic guitar demo)

Oliver: At that point, songs very much started as, like, words on a piece of paper.

Romy: We sort of used to share lyrics back and forth, like poems.

Oliver: I remember my first lyric was inspired by something my mum read in the paper about how you can have your ashes compressed so hard that they uh, turn into diamonds. Which is really macabre. But that's the first lyric: "You've applied the pressure to have me crystalised."

(Oliver vocals: "You've applied the pressure / To have me crystalised / And you've got the faith / That I could bring paradise")

Romy: Those first lines of "Crystalised," you know, I, I thought they were so visual and really unique but then I think I sort of reacted, then I'm sort of in my second verse trying to write something that is, got a similar pattern.

And wanted to use an interesting word like "crystalised," so there's like, "paralyzed," and, you know, other words that are kind of bouncing off what Oliver had said.

(Romy vocals: "I'll forgive and forget / Before I'm paralysed / Do I have to keep up the pace / To keep you satisfied?")

Oliver: Mine and Romy's writing was very much like a patchwork, rather than, like, sat in the room together.

But so many of the songs, from the outside, must really sound like we're singing together, you know, two parts of a love song sang at each other. You know, Romy and I being best friends. And not only that, both being gay.

Romy: (chuckles)

Oliver: You know, it's not directed at one another. It was kind of making each other's perspectives, kind of just hoping they would fit.

Romy: Sort of a shared space, both individually saying our perspectives on it, but never really asking like, "Ooh, what's that about for you?", necessarily. Just reacting to each other's lyrics.

But then you could sort of, like, create things and then send it back and forth between each other, have that distance from each other, but the closeness. Yeah, that autonomy to be able to make things separately was, was a big thing for me.

And the way Oliver and I sing together kind of comes from a place of like, “Oh, you go first, no you go first.” So then we sing together.

(Oliver and Romy vocals: “So don't think that I'm pushing you away / When you're the one that I've kept closest”)

Jamie: The first time I really remember was us trying to figure out what the song was and how to play it live, probably for that weekend's show. I was also trying to figure out my new toy, which was an MPC, and we plugged a microphone into it, and got Oliver to sing like an “ooh,” just a note, just to see how it worked.

And then recorded it into the machine, and started messing with the pitch, live, and that became the intro of “Crystallised.”

(Pitch-bent “ooh” sound)

So that sound is still that same sound from that first day of just trying to work out “Crystallised.”

Romy: It really feels like it's such a deep dive into memory to remember the creation of this song. I know that, in terms of my personal connection with playing the guitar, I, I've never really been that interested in, like, full chords. I really love, like, melodic guitar.

(guitar melody)

But wanting to be able to sing confidently and play the guitar, there was a simplicity to the instrumentation of it, because a lot of what we wanted to put on the album was exactly what we could play live. And I wouldn't feel confident to play that full intro riff and sing. It had, I had to be like, move to just running single notes.

(Romy vocals: “You don't move slow / Taking steps in my direction / The sound resounds, echo / Does it lessen your affection?”)

Hrishikesh: My conversation with The xx continues after this.

Oliver: When it came time to record this song, we'd actually done a few different versions with different producers. Like our label and management had set us up on like different speed dates. Like we had done a version of this song with Diplo, who is the most exciting person ever, to us.

And I think we'd done another version with a producer called Lex, but it wasn't quite right. Because I think, you know, the space in the music often ended up being filled by that person's, like, sound and their signature.

Jamie: Especially 'cause we were all so young, we didn't really, you know, know what we were doing, but it felt like we were just, you know, handed over to these different people.

Romy: We all just really loved the sound of the demos. They all just had, like, our feeling of the live show. And we would just, like, we'd hear some of the versions back and be like, "Oh, we just like how the demo sounded before."

And then you kind of get people saying, "Oh, but this is, you should work with them 'cause you know, they've done this." And I think we were all just quite like, "Oh, we're not really bothered about that. We just want it to sound like us."

Jamie: It was really useful to have gone through all that and hear all the different ways that things could be filled out. And I was learning a lot at the same time. But definitely in the back of my head, I was like, "I could do this."

Oliver: We didn't think it was an option for Jamie to produce until we had worked with other people.

Jamie: And then XL employed Rodaidh McDonald to be the engineer at their new studio, which was just the, in the garage of the headquarters of XL. And that sort of opened the door to the possibility of maybe me being able to do it, because he had all of the engineering skills. It kind of gave me the opportunity to try and prove myself.

Romy: And I remember feeling excited at the idea of Jamie doing it because I knew he would keep it sounding like us.

Jamie: Everything was so exciting. We had this space for free. We'd worked out how to do all these songs structurally, because we'd played them live so much.

(MPC live drum beat)

It was the MPC stuff first, so that the groove was right to record the guitars over. And I just literally played it in, like I would in the band. So I was playing it live, just

doing the whole thing in one go.

We were all talking about rumble drums, which is a term I think we just made up.

Romy: Yeah. (chuckles)

Jamie: (chuckles) Um, from listening to a few different bits of music.

Oliver: It's those tumblin' rumblin' drums. (chuckles) I remember you, like, tapping on a table,

Romy: (laughs)

Oliver: To kind of, like, get the idea across.

Jamie: I was working out how to make electronic production feel live and feel organic. Trying to work out how to make every click, every rim sound slightly different, like it would if you were just hitting a snare. So it was, like, painstaking.

Romy: And I play on the guitar,

(Romy's guitar)

And then Baria plays the second guitar part,

(add Baria's guitar)

And then Oliver joins with the bass.

(add Oliver's bass)

(Oliver vocals: "You've applied the pressure / To have me crystalised")

It's interesting to me to see how sparse the verses are.

(cont. Oliver vocals: "That I could bring paradise")

Oliver: There is just always a part of me that winces when I listen back to that, 'cause I, I almost don't recognize that person. It has an element of like finding, like, an old diary from being a teenager. You know, that is not how I sound today. When we recorded that, I was 18, and I'm 36 now, so I'm 18 years later.

Romy: Wow. (laughs)

Jamie: When we were kids, their voices sounded, if you were to pitch one up or one down, they would sound exactly the same.

Romy: I like to think that we learned to speak at a similar time. You know, we grew up together learning. So I like to think it's kind of interwoven with that, that we sing in a similar way.

(Oliver and Romy vocals: "So don't think that I'm pushing you away / When you're the one that I've kept closest / Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh")

I feel like that's a melody that Oliver brought to the song. There's quite a lot of that in, I realized in our first album. I, I don't know what it is.

Jamie: It might have just been that those are the moments where you play the more complicated guitar part so you couldn't do the words at the same time.

Romy: (laughs) Quite possibly, yes.

(guitar and vocals: "Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh / Ahh, ahh, ahh")

I kind of love the playfulness of it just being a free melody that, like, doesn't have words and people can sort of sing along with it.

Jamie: And at that particular time, I was really obsessed with not using any pre-made sounds. So every sound is sampled and layered from records that I owned. And that was just fun for me.

Romy: In theory, I think we've talked about doing the vocals at the same time, but I don't know if we actually, you know, I remember being a conversation of it being like a nice idea that we've sort of recorded everything in live.

I think that was aspirational because it had been written live, but I don't think we ended up doing that in the end.

Hrishikesh: Oh, here, let me play you, Oliver's vocal stem, because you can hear Romy's singing in the background being picked up by his mic, and vice versa.

(Romy mic bleed: "Does it lessen your affection? No" / Oliver vocal: "You say I'm foolish")

Oliver: Oh, so we did sing it at the same!

Jamie: Oh yeah.

Romy: Mm.

Oliver: Oh, that's, that's a nice discovery.

Romy: Nice. (laughs) Thank you for showing us this.

(Oliver and Romy vocals: "Ahh, Ahh, Ahh / Things have gotten closer to the sun / And I've done things in small doses / So don't think that I'm pushing you away / When you're the one that I've kept closest / Ahh, Ahh, Ahh")

There's a part towards the end of the song where we sing our individual parts that are different over each other. Singing our pre-choruses.

Oliver: Mine is: "Things have gotten closer to the sun, and I've done things in small doses. So don't think that I'm pushing you away when you are the one that I've kept closest."

Romy: And mine is: "Glaciers have melted to the sea. I wish the tide would take me over. I've been down on my knees, and you just keep on getting closer."

(Oliver and Romy overlapping vocals: "Glaciers have melted to the sea / (Things have gotten closer to the sun) / I wish the tide would take me over / (And I've done things in small doses) / I've been down on my knees / (So don't think that I'm pushing you away) / And you just keep on getting closer / (When you're the one that I've kept closest)") Go slow")

It's still, now, one of my favorite parts, and like, we just performed it. But I have to, like, block him out completely in my mind and just sing my part, and not try and think about what you're saying. 'Cause I'll start singing your part but that I kind of look back on fondly as like, that's an interesting decision that we did that. (laughs)

And I love it now, but do you remember why we did that?

Oliver: You know, in hindsight, the song to me is the avoidant and the anxious and, you know, that moment feels like a moment of, like, conflict with the resolution of coming back together and singing in unison.

The person in the relationship that feels scared of intimacy takes, you know, a step back and then the other person in the relationship, who feels scared by that step back, and takes a step forward.

And that kind of, like, cat-and-mouse chase. Which is all too frequent, because I think those two characters often attract one another. And without, you know, getting too therapy and personal, you know, I definitely relate to that anxious role. And yeah, I kind of see, very much, this song as like a tale of those two

characters.

But with a resolution and a compromise of, you know, that final refrain of just "go slow." You know, it's not that I, I'm not in this, it's not that I don't care, but you're gonna have to match my kind of speed in how we do this relationship.

(Oliver and Romy vocals: "Go slow / Go slow")

This album, to me, is peering into other people's relationships and building my own expectations and my own fantasies and excitement about it. I felt such an embarrassment that I hadn't been in love. Like it made the songs less honest or less vulnerable, but it was still such a personal thing for me to share my kind of, like, fantasies and my feelings. I think Romy grew up a lot faster than I did.
(chuckles)

Romy: (chuckles)

Oliver: And, you know, you, you were writing from more of a place of experience, I think.

Romy: I have always been drawn to romance and the euphoria of that, and the heartache of that. And I think that I, I was writing from, some experience at this time, still very early, early love and lust and longing. But I think we definitely spoke about it not being so specific. Without time, place, or gender. I think this song, for me, feels very open to interpretation, which, which I love.

(instrumental)

We've all grown up together, literally, from a young age, and throughout this band and throughout this process. And I feel very nostalgic hearing this song again. And it's really lovely to be able to talk about it.

You know, we've been relearning how to play all this old music. And going into the projects and the stems and, and like reconnecting with the decisions we were making then. And I've actually really enjoyed that as we are working on a new album, to just reconnect with those decisions and that, that sort of naivety and the simplicity of that time. And I think it's nice to learn from ourselves again.

When you say it's half our life ago, that does bring up...

Oliver: Mm-hmm.

Romy: It's, I can't believe it's been that long and I'm, I'm so grateful to be able to still play this music.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Crystalised," by The xx, in its entirety.

("Crystalised" by THE XX)

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

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.