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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Doesn't Matter" by CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS)

Hrishikesh: Christine and the Queens is a singer, songwriter, and producer from France. Her debut album was first released in 2014 in French, and then in 2015, she released an English version of it. It was critically acclaimed and she won the Victoire de la Musique - France's equivalent of the Grammy - for Best Female Artist in 2015. Earlier this year, in July 2018, she released this single "Doesn't Matter" in advance of her second album, *Chris*. Like before, she made a French version and an English version, but this time she wrote both versions simultaneously. Coming up, she talks about what that translation process was like, and the possibilities it opened up, as she takes apart "Doesn't Matter." The song and the story first began in Chris' basement.

("Doesn't Matter" by CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS)

Chris: My name is Christine and the Queens.

(Music fades)

Chris: I'm actually starting to make music without any clear purpose, like flexing the muscle every day of, you know, sitting and writing. And this time around, I just started to, you know, I opened my laptop and I was like, "I'm going to maybe just try and do a beat, and we'll see where it goes from there." So I'm working in Logic Studio 10, mainly sometimes using basic sounds on there. And I just found at some point this kind of like morphing sound.

(Synth)

Chris: And I warped it a bit and add some filters on it.

(Synth)

Chris: The move of it felt really organic.

(Synth)

Chris: Like you felt like taming an animal. And I started to do the bassline.

(Synth with bass)

Chris: And it was like, I don't know, I created this loop and it was hypnotic to me.

(Synth with bass)

Chris: Sometimes you get totally crazy over a sound and you're like, "uhh!" [laughter] I don't know, something was quite groovy and at the same time quite animalistic to me.

(Synth with bass)

Chris: Most of the time in my productions [laughter], there are mistakes [laughter]. But when you try to remove the mistakes, because I can hear the clicks of, I think it's the attack of the filter or something like that, and it's kind of weird.

(Synth with bass)

Chris: To me, it sounds like a spine. The attacks feels like, I don't know, the end of the bone. It's weird, it's weird. But it feels like if you remove that, everything crumbles. So I was like, "Oh, let's keep the mistakes then."

(Synth with bass)

(Music ends)

Chris: I remember that night, I was quite sad. I'm a writer who desperately wants to relate to people, but I'm socially awkward and I tend to be a bit tortured, right, because I felt like I was not fitting in. To me, it was because I was a girl, and a queer one. And being a girl is an immense pain in the ass today because you are made to feel not pretty enough, not strong enough. I mean it's a nightmare to be a girl. I like it, but society such as it is, that it's a nightmare. And especially when you feel like you're not fitting the norms and you're queer, it's a second problem. And with *Chaleur Humaine*, my first album, and everything that I received with it, warmth and acceptance, and being listened to, and understood as I wanted to, I was like, "Oh, maybe something is going to mend at some point. And maybe I'm

going to, you know, restore a positive narrative, maybe it's going to heal me."
But, success never heals. And actually it can sometimes even be harder to relate
to people because people talk to you but they don't talk to you. Because you're
a projection of their own ideas that they have when they listen to your music. So
I stopped touring and I was back in this kind of solitary life. I only felt
comfortable on my own, late at night on the streets. And I kind of started to build
the beat around that.

(Beat)

Chris: The [imitates beat] came from my Logic again. The roughest kind of lo-fi sounds.
           There is a toughness that suited the kind of slight desolation I had. Like to me, it
           makes me think of the loneliness in cities, where when you really feel lonely and
           sad everything resonates in your head as signs of desolation. Images of grey
           concrete, and subways, and blasts of klaxons, and everything is a sign because
           it feels like the whole world is resonating through your sadness. And to me,
           because the beat is rough, it allows me to be sad on top of it. It felt less obscene
           to do it that way. And it felt like the right beat to be totally and utterly honest,
           that night. I was like, "Well, shall I unfold totally? Like, shall I try to write the
           rawest, most exposed song I could write?" And I was like, "Let's do it."

(Beat)

Chris: You're going to hear a really raw [laughter] first draft. Bear in mind that it was a
           first draft, at 2 AM, and I was crying, okay? [laughter]

(Beat)

Chris: I started with the first line and I carried on. And you can actually tell that it's kind
           of like a stream of consciousness.

(Vocals, synth, and bass join)

Chris: The track started in French, but I had to translate it. I mean actually I wanted to
           translate it because I had the opportunity to release it in the US and the UK, and
           I didn't want to be an exotic just French singer, I wanted to try and relate more. I
           don't know if people get my English most of the time but it's very much me
           trying [laughter]. But the chorus was immediately in English actually.

(Vocals, synth, bass, and beat: "It doesn't matter, does it? / If I know any exit")

(Vocals: "If I believe in God, and if God does exist / If I believe in God, and if God does exist / It doesn't matter, does it?")

Chris: I knew I would have to have some translating process happening because the song has two versions. But because of the pace of the French, it's quite wordy. It was kind of a challenge to make it work in English as well and have that same quality and honesty, and sonically, to have the same pace, and melody. It's a really interesting challenge, it's like working the core of the song twice.

(Vocals)

Chris: One is my native language, one is something I'm still taming.

(Vocals: "Lingering on when they kiss")

Chris: So it's different weapons, different strength in each language, and it becomes really interesting because with French I do have the utter intimacy, the poetic force because I master it really well as a language. With English I do have something more straightforward sometimes and more naïve, and sometimes, it help me to actually move forward in the English version. It unlocked something and then I was back in the French. It really became something thrilling to work on.

(Vocals: "It doesn't matter, does it?")

Chris: I love working on harmonies, it's one of my great pleasure, it's like eating chocolate.

(Vocals: "If I know any exit / If I believe in God, and if God does exist / If I believe in God, and if God does exist / It doesn't matter, does it?")

Chris: I think it's quite a disparate chorus in a way, I mean, "It doesn't matter, does it? / If I know any exit / And if God does exist." But to me, the harmonies feels like something is resolving in a way. There is kind of like hope in the harmonies, which is interesting because the line is not so much hopeful.

(Vocals: "If I know any exit / If I believe in God, and if God does exist / If I believe in God, and if God does exist")

Chris: The line is desperate but the music says otherwise. And so then, what does it create? Like, does it indicate that I'm actually going to be okay when I'm actually saying I'm not going to be okay?

(Vocals: "And if I am cast out 'cause I wanted some more / And if this guy dances way too close to the shore / And if I could just push this door chalked on the wall / And if after the void there's somewhere else to fall")

Chris: This song is a bit like a Greek tragedy to me. It's actually theatre as much as music to me because it really has a theatrical progression. In Greek tragedies, there is like the figure of the hero is speaking, but there is a Coryphaeus

Hrishikesh: The Coryphaeus is the leader of a Greek chorus.

Chris: that sometimes gives comments. You know, the hero is like, "I'm not feeling good," and the chorus is like, "You're not feeling good!" And this song was calling for like this dramaturgy of a tragedy. The lead vocal is lonely and feels immensely lonely but it's actually surrounded with the Greek chorus, and it just is coming from the harmonies. And it's just a different storytelling.

(Vocals: "God, God, God, God / God, God, God, God / God, God, God, God / God, God, God")

Chris: I didn't want to add too much harmonic information in that track, I wanted it to remain really aggressive and bare. So the only thing to add was like rhythms instead of too many harmonies.

(Beat)

Chris: The hi-hats centering at the second verse, it's kind of like an extra informational rhythm that make the pace a bit more urgent.

(Beat)

Chris: And in the French version, I'm saying, "It's rage that makes me go forward." And to me, the hi-hat is an indication of movement. It's like I'm starting to walk.

(Vocals with beat)

(Music ends)

Chris: There is a moment in the track where I really wanted it to get super intimate, and almost naked before actually the track reopens again, and I'm projecting my voice even more. It has to be almost like, like in theatre when someone suddenly acknowledges the public and you get the sense of intimacy because the character is actually breaking the fourth wall and talk to you directly. And you like feel this close to the character, and I wanted to create that moment. And it was already in the lyrics like, "Forget I said it, I soliloquize," like it's me breaking the narrative and talking directly to people. The whole track is actually my voice, I sang it twice and layered the vocal for it to be really thick but this time it breaks down to just a single one. Really compressed, like this close to you.

(Vocals: "Uh, forget I said it / Uh, I soliloquise")

Chris: If you want to be listened to, just don't speak too loud. It's actually way more efficient than if you scream at them [laughter]. It's kind of like knowing when to pull attention. The whole rest of the production breaks, there is just like the bassline and synthesizers.

(Vocals, synths, and bass: "Uh, forget I said it / Uh, I soliloquise / Uh, a stinging nettle")

Chris: And then it starts again with like boof, boof, boof, boof, boof, boof.

(Beat)

(Synth)

(Music ends)

Chris: And I remember like spending like a week on that, like the right sound of like the boof, boof, boof, boof, boof, for it to be hectic and not to, I mean it's like doing lace details. Like it was finding the right kick who could distort well.

(Beat)

Chris: And it sounds maybe deceptively simple now but it took me a week to do it properly.

(Synth)

Chris: So at that point in the lyrics in the song, there is another character entering. And it's unclear if it's a projection, a ghost, someone I wouldn't want to meet and love, something I am, it's unclear. But I'm talking to someone who, in French, that figure is called "Le voleur de soleil," which means "The sun-stealer." And it's a figure of hope, I guess, and I'm just at that point, I start to address that figure, and tell him, "Run away," because I'm in a place of despair and he basically represents hope and I'm like, "Just get away from me, and run, and steal the sun, and go away!"

(Vocals with synth: "Run if you stole a shard of sunlight (Yeah, yeah) / Don't ever tell them, I've got your back (Yeah, yeah) / Choking to tears with shards of sunlight")

Chris: And the choir actually helps me, turn this order into a lamento. I'm basically saying, "Go away!" And the choir is like, "Go away!"

(Vocals: "Run if you stole a shard of sunlight (Oh, run) / Don't ever tell them, I've got your back (Save all you can) / Choking to tears with shards of sunlight (Oh, you won't be found) / Run if you stole a shard of sunlight / Oh, and never come back! / Please never come back / Oh, please, please never come back")

Chris: Sometimes, you're surprised by what you write. I mean, writing the track, I actually realized how sad I was. I was like, "Oh [laughter], I'm really sad."

(Synth)

Chris: Because it's a cathartic way of expressing yourself. You have to put your hands in what hurts you and, you know, in order to be raw and unfolded. So it's never like a pleasing thing, like catharsis is not pleasing, but it's needed.

(Piano joins)

(Piano ends)

Chris: I was listening to it and crying, and be like, "I'm so sad, I can't believe I was so sad [laughter]." But you know, I was like, "Well, this is maybe something other people could relate to it differently. Because I do believe loneliness is a great disease that is shared by many, many people. Yeah.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Doesn't Matter," by Christine and the Queens, in its entirety.

("Doesn't Matter" by CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Christine and the Queens, and for a
                link to buy or stream this song.
                This episode was produced and edited by me, with help from Olivia Wood. The
                illustration for this episode was done by Carlos Lerma. Next time on Song
                Exploder, The Decemberists.

("Once In My Life" by THE DECEMBERISTS)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of
                fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at
                radiotopia.fm. I'd love to know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song
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                Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Once In My Life" by THE DECEMBERISTS)

(Music fades)