

Song Exploder
Ghostface Killah - The Battlefield
Episode 26

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

Hrishikesh: In November 2014, Ghostface Killah of the Wu-Tang Clan released his 11th album, called *36 Seasons*. A lot of people worked on it: a soul and R&B quartet The Revelations serve as a kind of house backing band for the whole thing. Lil' Fame from M.O.P. and engineer Daniel Schlett help produce, and there's a host of guest vocalists, including the ones on this track: singer Tre Williams, and rappers AZ and Kool G Rap. But the person who put the whole thing together, came up with the idea, and corralled all of these contributors is someone who doesn't appear on the record. His name is Bob Perry, and his title is A&R, which stands for Artist & Repertoire. Nowadays, that usually means the person at a record label who acts as a talent scout for new artists, but back in the day, the A&R reps were often responsible for much more. In this episode, Bob Perry talks about how the Ghostface song "The Battlefield" came together, and Revelations guitarist Wes Mingus breaks down how the beat was assembled. Here's "The Battlefield" on Song Exploder.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

(Music fades)

Bob: This is Bob Perry, I'm the A&R on the album.

("I Forgot To Be Your Lover" by THE REVELATIONS ft. TRE WILLIAMS)

Bob: I was working on a record by a singer called Tre Williams, who's a sort of soul, R&B singer. And The Revelations ended up becoming the band for Tre Williams' album.

("I Forgot To Be Your Lover" by THE REVELATIONS ft. TRE WILLIAMS)

Bob: I, also, at that time, was working as an A&R for Koch Records in New York. One of the artists that we had signed to our label was The RZA. The RZA became familiar with The Revelations' work. I played him some of the stuff, he was really digging it, he came to some of the shows, and that led to a working relationship between myself, RZA, and the band. We did two compilation albums, and then we collaborated with him on the soundtrack to his film, *The Man with the Iron Fists*.

(Music ends)

Bob: I had also worked with Ghostface prior to all of that. The idea was to do a concept album with Ghostface. I have a friend of mine who's a writer. His name is Matthew Rosenberg, and he's a comic book writer. And he and I batted around a couple ideas for narratives for an album. And we came up with this idea of 36 seasons about, you know, a guy who'd been away from his neighborhood for a long time, comes back home, things have changed up for the worse, and bad things happen along the road to redemption. It's a different process than you have with most musicians and most rappers. Most rappers would never let this kind of thing happen, but thankfully Ghostface has the faith in the process to allow a piece of music like this to be created. He has a huge amount of trust in me, yes [laughter], I would say. And I'm thankful for that, you know? The thing is, what you got to understand is that that is really how he came up. He always worked with, I would say, strong voice producer, and he says, you know, it's, "I perceive myself kind of like an actor, you know, like I get called in, you know, the guys give me my script. I do my scenes. And then I leave. So many months later, I see it on the big screen, and I'm like, 'Wow, I never thought it was going to go that way.'" I wouldn't take credit as a songwriter, you know, we just came up with the narrative for the album, but the rappers wrote the lyrics, and the musicians wrote the music. I just was kind of an A&R, you know? But that's the classic, I think, definition of an A&R, putting together artists and repertoire, you know? The song that we're discussing here is called "The Battlefield," and that's song 1 on the album. And that's a song where each of the three main characters in the album kind of establish who their characters are, and tell a little piece of their story. Once we had agreed on the storyline, my job was to come up with bullet points for each song. "OK, Ghost, in song 1, these are the topics that I need you to deal with in your verse." And what we did was we gave Ghostface demo beats, not the actual music that you hear on this album, but we gave him beats, and we gave him the general instruction for that particular track. And then, he laid down his verse, and sent it back to me.

(Vocals: "Ayo, I'm back after nine years, that's 36 seasons / Shit is changed up for all types of reasons / Staten Island ain't the same, shit is lame / No familiar faces son, I'm dodging the game / I want a clean slate, but these cops stay screwin' / Snatching me up")

(Vocals fade)

Bob: And then, once I had that, then I knew what I needed to tell the other guys, because the other rapper's job is to establish their own characters, and fill in the bits of the story that Ghostface, for whatever reason, doesn't touch on, and to move the narrative along.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

Bob: So basically the characters are Tony Stark played by Ghostface, of course. Kool G Rap, his character is called the Future, the Drug Kingpin / Slumlord, who's got the neighborhood jammed up.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

Bob: And then AZ's Rogers, Lieutenant Rogers.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

(Music fades)

Bob: I just imagined I was casting a movie, and it was like an audio movie, you know? Like maybe like one of those radio plays. You imagine, like, what their voices sound like, and what the personality is that they have either in real life or that they've had on records in the past. And then, Ghostface filled in the missing pieces at the very end. There's a guy named Lil' Fame, he's from M.O.P., a rap group here in New York.

("Ante Up" by M.O.P.)

(Music fades)

Bob: He and I were here in the studio before the band came, and we were messing around with a sample from a gospel record. We couldn't really make it work because the time signature was so slow, but I liked the feel of it; the darkness

and the blues. It had the thing that I wanted for this song, and the idea of these old warriors.

(Sample)

Bob: The fact that The Revelations are a solo band, to me, they were the perfect guys for the job. As much as Ghost was the right rapper, I thought The Revelations were the right band. Although we had worked in the past on other projects with the Wu-Tang Clan, there's never been one where we had this much, I would say, creative control.

(Sample fades)

Bob: It was a tremendous opportunity to showcase the capabilities and talents of the group.

Wes: Yeah, this is Wes talking now. Wes Mingus, I play guitar and bass on the song, and co-produce. Like Bob said, he and Fame worked out the kind of vibe they wanted for the track, and the general feeling of it. I heard where they were going conceptually with the sample that they were working with. You know, they had been working on it, and working on it, and they were just like, "This just isn't working," you know? And then, we just kind of took it from there. And so, Gintas Janusonis, the drummer, he would lay down the drums first.

(Drums)

Wes: We knew we wanted to keep the vibe of the demos that were sent out, because we didn't want a drum track that wasn't going to gel with the lyrics that were given to us. And so, it was sort of a reverse engineered thing, because the beat came after the verses, which is obviously totally backwards from normal hip hop approach.

(Drums end)

Wes: There was a certain, sort of, chord structure and movement in the original gospel recordings. What we decided to do is just dumb it down, keep it Wu-Tang, and just rock on just one note.

(Bass)

Wes: I played the bass on it, rocking [mimics bass]. You know, and just keep it right there, and that was the first layer after the drums.

(Drums join)

Wes: From there, I decided to double the bassline on the guitar to just give it a little bit more grit and motion.

(Guitar)

Wes: And then, added a couple more stabs.

(Guitar)

Wes: There's some Wurlitzer.

(Wurlitzer joins)

Wes: There's the high, kind of, guitar part that does [mimics guitar].

(Guitar)

(Wurlitzer and drums join)

(Music ends)

Bob: And then, we created the intro.

(Intro)

Wes: We knew this was song 1, so we knew something had to come in the beginning that sounded like an intro. The treatment is much different, and the beginning sounds much dustier and kind of like an old record.

(Intro)

(Music ends)

Bob: The chorus says, "I've been on the battlefield for a long time / I can see life closing in on this old body of mine."

(Vocals: "Been on the battlefield")

Bob: Tre Williams.

(Vocals: "for a long, long time")

Bob: Yeah, so Tre, I mean, Tre and I know each other backwards and forwards. We have worked together for eight years. I told him what he needed to do. He did it in 10 minutes, and then left.

(Vocals: "I can see life closing in on this old body of mine")

Bob: I guess I wrote that part, but I don't take credit for it because, again, it's a very traditional kind of thing. Like you will hear something like that in hundreds of quartet gospel records.

Wes: Even though we were a live band approaching doing a hip hop project, we didn't want everything to sound like a bunch of guys just noodling around, and like, this is a rapper over a band, you know? We wanted the textures to come from different atmospheres, which is a very hip hop kind of thing. Because it's sample-based traditionally, and every sample is taken from a different record, different time, different genre. And that's part of what makes the soup and the gumbo of hip hop so beautiful; making a collage out of different sounds and bringing it all together, and recycling it in a kind of way that creates something new, even though you're taking it from things that were pre existing.

(Band)

Bob: A lot of people think that these songs on this album are samples. They don't know that it's a band until they look at the credits in the CD booklet, or whatever, you know? Like people all the time, come to me, "Oh, what was this? What sample did you use for this?" Or,

Wes: Yeah.

Bob: But I don't think it sounds like samples. When I hear it, it doesn't sound like a sample record to me. It sounds like something new. It sounds like something in between what other people have done before, you know?

Hrishikesh: And Bob, do you have a background making music yourself?

Bob: No. Only trying to get other people to make music I like.

Wes: [laughter]

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Battlefield," by Ghostface Killah ft. Kool G Rap, AZ, and Tre Williams, in its entirety.

("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information, including a link to buy the song "The Battlefield," and a list of the other songs that appeared in this episode. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find this show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Coming up next time on Song Exploder, Blonde Redhead.

("Penultimo" by BLONDE REDHEAD)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Penultimo" by BLONDE REDHEAD)

(Music fades)