

Song Exploder
Goapele - Stand
Episode 110

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.

("Stand" by GOAPELE)

Hrishikesh: Goapele is a singer/songwriter from the Bay Area. She released her first album in 2001. Since then, she's released five more albums and collaborated with Snoop Dogg. In 2017, on her album *Dreamseeker*, she put out the song "Stand." It was written in the wake of the shooting death of Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old black man who was shot and killed while unarmed and handcuffed on a subway platform by a Bay Area Rapid Transit Police officer. The shooting took place in 2009. Coming up, Goapele explains why it took 8 years for her to finish the song.

("Stand" by GOAPELE)

Goapele: My name is Goapele.

(Music fades)

Goapele: I first started working on this song in '09. Oscar Grant had just been murdered by the BART police in Oakland, and Oscar Grant seemed like a younger person I would know, it could've been someone that was like a nephew or a cousin. He wasn't an activist, he wasn't involved in anything super crazy on the streets, he was like a regular young guy, you know, hanging out with his friends, and so it was very tangible and relatable, and an obvious threat of like, *this could be anybody*. I think it was just a wakeup call of how close to home the brutality and profiling is. There were these rallies going on in Downtown Oakland, and our studio was in West Oakland like really close to that. For me, growing up in Oakland and Berkley, it's a place where going to marches can be as common as going to concerts. And a lot of times when you go to a march there's going to be also be, you know, a local hip-hop artist, and maybe a singer, and it's going to be like a community gathering. So I feel like it's always been expected of me to say something in my music. I mean I feel like I've probably been more commercial and straight-ahead than I would've expected myself to be, when I was a teenager first thinking of making this a career. And I wanted to say

something, but just felt like I needed to hold tight and get my thoughts together. And so, I kind of sat a while with the lyrics.

(Vocals: “Just stand up for something / Don’t fall back for nothing / If we don’t stand for something / We’ll fall for anything”)

Goapele: And when this song first started coming together, I remember a beat that Dan Electric did.

(Beat)

Goapele: Dan Electric is a producer out of the Bay Area. It started out kind of retro, kind of like 80s. It was a four bar loop, just from a preset that we had on a keyboard in the studio. I started singing that melody, the “just stand up,” over the music.

(Vocals join: “Just stand up for something / Don’t fall back for nothing / If we don’t stand for something / We’ll fall for anything”)

(Music ends)

Goapele: But there was something that I felt like didn't translate all the way, when I first started [laughter] out. Not that I wanted it to sound so serious, because the lyrics are so serious. I wanted it to have a balance where you'd feel uplifted, but also touched, and like motivated to get up and stand up, and do something. So it just kind of sat in a group with so many songs that I've started, that I'm waiting to finish. And it's not often that I'll start writing a song one year, and then so many years later, come back to finish it, and put it out. But the climate of what has been going on leading into 2017, where I feel like so many of us are under attack, and just so encouraged to be numb, and dumbed-down, and depressed. It was like, “OK, now's the time to put this out,” and maybe I waited for a reason. So I listened to the song, I was like, “These lyrics still make sense, but how can we update the production a little bit?” At the end of the day, I want my songs to come together and feel effortless. It wasn't effortless doing this [laughter] one though, you know? I worked with a few different producers to get to the version that I have now. I mean, you don't know how many times I sung [laughter] this song, honestly. And I was like singing it over with different emotion to see if, you know, that would work. I just kept trying different things. Wondering like, *Am I tripping? Maybe this song is, you know, something I did, but it's not worth people hearing if, since it's like not coming together easily.* But the lyrics in the story were always there. So I trusted in that, you know, if we could just get the

music and my performance to feel right. So Bedrock, a producer that I've worked with for years, wanted to take a stab at producing it. So he was like, "Re-sing it, you know, more laid back."

(Vocals: "Catch me if you can / Understand it's a new day / Life is real, but we still gotta get paid")

Goapele: Then he started laying some other chords on it,

(Vocals with Juno: "Put your picture in a frame / It's time to step into this double dutch game")

(Juno)

Goapele: That's a Juno. When he started playing that, I felt an emotional connection, and it kind of has like a nostalgic feel. And I always like a, well, vintage keyboard sound combined with something modern. I think it's the part of me that feels rooted in soul music. I just like to have something that feels organic or analog-y to balance out, or have a juxtaposition to more modern programmed drums.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Goapele: And then, we went to this home studio with Raphael Saddiq's nephew, Jaden Wiggins, who played guitar.

(Guitar)

Goapele: It's very different. And I was wondering like, *Would it still have energy though?* And I also, I mean, I'm kind of embarrassed to admit this, but I also wanted to have this resonate with younger people. It's embarrassing because I always feel like I shouldn't care. Like if anyone likes my music, that's cool. And I never want to feel like I'm trying for a certain audience, but it was definitely a goal to tap into some new energy. So it was interesting that this was like a couple younger guys that were starting to play on it, and it was feeling more mellow, but I was like, "Are they feeling this?" And it didn't sound like a song to me yet, but it sounded like something new.

(Guitar ends)

Goapele: We sent it off to a keyboard player that plays

(Keyboard)

Goapele: in my band a lot, Dave Jackson. He added three different layers. Organ and a couple different keyboard sounds.

(Organ joins)

(Music fades)

Goapele: Bedrock added a breakdown where you can hear like a crowd of kids yelling and playing.

(Crowd of kids)

Goapele: I liked that they just sound like they're living. There is like this life before anyone's taking away our power or our joy.

(Crowd ends)

Goapele: You know, I was a new mother when I was writing the song. And I felt a little bit corny, because I felt like I was kind of like rap singing [laughter].

(Vocals: "I'm a mama, freedom fighter, I'm a queen")

Goapele: It was a little different for me to sing more fast pace and like a rapper. But I just kind of wanted to say it out who I am, and feel like a bad-ass, but also just feel like an ordinary human. I mean, just like, as a mom, just as a person in this world, this is what I don't want to see out there,

(Vocals: "But if I don't speak up then tell me what it means / Meanwhile justice keeps on fading away")

Goapele: So I hoped it would be empowering for other people, as each person kind of figures out who they are in their own life, or their position in the community. I was really adamant that I wanted the choruses to have a crowd voice. I didn't want it just as a woman's voice. I wanted it to feel like I could sing this at a rally, not like I perform at a lot of rallies, but early on, that's one of the places I started, and I wanted it to feel like a movement. So, I mean, we had the engineer in

there. We had some people that would consider themselves singers, some people that wouldn't, that just added to the crowd.

(Vocals: "If we don't stand for something / We'll fall for anything")

(Juno)

Goapele: So when we were mixing the song, it was longer, and it kind of faded out with the music. The vocals were already over, and it just felt anticlimactic to me.

(Guitar joins)

Goapele: The point of it is to feel like there's a crowd, and you're part of something. And so, I wanted it to end a capella, for that to be the last impression. You hear these voices together, men and women.

(Vocals: "Just stand up for something / If we don't stand for something / We'll fall for anything")

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Stand," by Goapele, in its entirety.

("Stand" by GOAPELE)

Hrishikesh: For links to buy this track, and to learn more about Goapele, and about the shooting of Oscar Grant, visit songexploder.net.
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("Sugar for the Pill" by SLOWDIVE)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Slowdive. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Sugar for the Pill" by SLOWDIVE)

(Music fades)

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