

Song Exploder
Halsey - You Asked for This
Episode 223

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.

("You Asked for This" by HALSEY)

Hrishikesh: Halsey is an award winning singer and songwriter from New Jersey. She's been nominated for two Grammys, and she's sold over a million records.

("You Asked for This" by HALSEY)

Hrishikesh: In August, she released her fourth album, *If I Can't Have Love, I Want Power*, which was produced by the Grammy and Oscar winning duo, Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, from Nine Inch Nails. Halsey wrote one of the songs on the album, "You Asked for This," with Greg Kurstin who's won 8 Grammys himself, including Producer of the Year. In this episode, Halsey tells the story of making this song while pregnant with her son, and how that shaped the lyrics and the music.

("You Asked for This" by HALSEY)

Halsey: I'm Halsey.

(Music fades)

Halsey: When I first started "You Asked for This," I was 26, and I was pregnant, and I didn't have many peers in the industry who were having kids as young as me. So I was kind of having this full existential crisis of like, "What is my life going to be? Do I have to give up everything that I love? Do I have to give up the parts of me that I think make me the best artist that I am?" I was working with Greg Kurstin, who's experienced and seasoned, and knows how to get right to the guts of what makes a really good song. I'm in his home, his kid's doing homework at the kitchen table, you know, in the room outside the studio. And he has like a really wonderful relationship with his wife, he's a great dad, and his daughter's riding her scooter around in the front yard, and it's like a completely different world. So, it really taps into this duality for me, which is me still as like,

you know, someone who's kind of spontaneous, and maybe sometimes irresponsible, and like a little bit more lawless. And then, the version of me who's like tender and mature and compassionate, and wants to hang out with somebody's kids. And this kind of flip-flop is happening in the midst of me being pregnant, trying to figure out who am I going to be on the other side of this? Which one? Do I have to pick? So I walked into the studio in Hawaii, and I looked at Greg, who's a tremendous guitarist, like incredible instrumentalist, and I was like, "I want to make something kind of shoegazey, like "My Bloody Valentine.""

("When You Sleep" by MY BLOODY VALENTINE)

(Music fades)

Halsey: I wanted the song to feel like I was floating in between two spaces. You know, like that feeling when you go to sit down, and there's two chairs, and like you don't land on either of them. You kind of [laughter] fall through the middle. That was the feeling that I was having in this, you know, transitional space in my life. And so, Greg, he kind of just started playing guitar.

(Electric guitar)

Halsey: The first thing I did, which is what I usually do when I start writing music, is I started writing a poem. And the ambiance of him playing this guitar kind of like put this poem into my head. I'm barefoot, and I've been in the sun, and I'm in these like ripped jeans that I can't button because my belly's getting bigger, and I'm sitting on the couch, and so, you know, the song opens up with, "I don't know what you want from me / I'm sunburnt lips and summer feet / I'm tattered like these Levi jeans / Punch wasted on redundancy."

(Vocals join: "Don't know what you want from me / When I'm sunburnt lips and summer feet / I'm tattered like these Levi jeans / Punch-wasted on redundancy")

(Music ends)

Halsey: It was exactly who and how I was in that moment when the first notes of this song kind of came into conception. I let my guard down for a little bit, looked inside, and was like, "Okay, what are you feeling right now?" And I started to get kind of emotional because I realized what I was feeling was fear. Anyone who had asked me up until that point, you know, how I was feeling, I would be like,

“Oh, I'm great. Like, you know, I'm so excited to be pregnant.” You know, they're like, “Are you scared about labor?” I'm like, “Nope, not scared at all.” “Are you scared about being a mom?” “Nope. I was born to do this.” And I was just kind of like putting on a brave face. And the one thought that keeps coming into my head is, “Go be a big girl. This is what you asked for, you asked for this.”

(Electric guitar)

Halsey: There's three voices in this song. There's verse me, which is kind of like whiny me who's like, “Am I resigned to, to this kind of like domesticated complacency?”

(Vocals join: “You wished upon a falling star / And then left behind the avant-garde / For lemonade in crystal glasses / Picket fences, file taxes”)

(Music fades)

Halsey: And then, there's the critical voice in the chorus that's kind of like, “Well shut up and be a big girl, you asked for this, like we're going to do it, we're going to be fine. You don't really have a choice anymore.” I don't know, I just kind of started like bullying myself. And I just could hear that voice in my head over and over and over again, but the delivery of that chorus the first time I did it, didn't feel right. And it was because my delivery was too weak. It didn't have enough authority. And I was like, “I need to put some chest into this.”

(Vocals with bass: “Go on and be a big girl / You asked for this now / Go on and be a big girl / Or everybody's gonna drown you out / Go on and be a big girl / You asked for this now / You better show 'em why you talk so loud”)

Halsey: I was experimenting with the type of vocal delivery that I've never really experimented with before. And it was kind of motivated by that like Gwen Stefani, No Doubt, like super nasally like you know,

(Vocals: “Go on and be a big girl”)

Halsey: That sort of voice. Gwen Stefani like really nails that. She was obviously like an instrumental part of my development as an artist. And it was really cool to like throw that in there, because for a song that's about my inner child and my future as a mother, it was cool to tap into someone who was like there for me as an artist, when I was a child and when I was like kind of coming of age.

(Vocals: "Go on and be a big girl / You asked for this now / You better show 'em why you talk so loud")

Halsey: And as soon as I tried it, Greg and I both looked at each other, and we were like, "That's it. Like, that is the voice." This amazing thing happens when I write with Greg, which is that we don't really talk all that much. There's always this knowing look that he gives me, you know, which is like that he sees me and he sees what I'm going through, but like he kind of just listens, and he just lets me get it out in the only way that I know how to. And then, when it's over, we look at each other and we're kind of like, "[sigh] This is good. Yeah."

(Drums)

Halsey: So Nine Inch Nails was my favorite band for, you know, most of my adolescence, and most of my early work is me just kind of poorly plagiarizing them in like a sugar coated way. So it was my greatest dream to make a record with them.

(Drums)

Halsey: When Trent and Atticus got their hands on these songs, they took them apart, with the exception of, "You Asked for This." That was the one where we really stuck to the original mentality. And like, once we started working on "You Asked for This," like it became immediately clear to me that they were on board with making this song really fuzzy and really textured.

(Guitars join)

(Drums end)

Halsey: Trent and Atticus, they really helped me create that authentic like, My Bloody Valentine, you know, sound. And so, there are 33 guitars on, "You Asked for This."

(Guitars)

Halsey: I don't think I've ever had that many guitars on a song before.

(Bass and drums join)

(Music ends)

Halsey: All of those guitars are supposed to kind of create a sense of anxiety that tells the listener, "I'm having so many feelings at once and now you are too." And then, there's a third voice that enters, that's kind of like my ego, which is like,

(Vocals with electric guitar: "I want my cake on a silver platter / I want a fistful in my hands")

Halsey: And then, you know, that voice turns kind of a carnal and animalistic and sexual. She's like,

(Vocals, electric guitar, and drums: "I want a fist around my throat / I wanna cry so hard, I choke")

Halsey: I want everything that I asked for. So it's kind of this voice that kind of becomes like

(Electric guitar)

Halsey: stern and almost like malevolent. That's like, you know, "You're going to be a mom, and you're going to have sex, and you're going to cut your hair, and get tattoos, and you're going to feed your baby, and go for walks, but you're also going to wear leather and latex and do whatever you want because you can. You can do everything. You can have everything." There's this moment of kind of freedom at the end where I'm like, "Well, why can't I? Why can't I have both?"

(Vocals and drums join: "Ah / Ah, ah / Ah, ah")

(Music fades)

Halsey: When I got pregnant, I was like, "What am I as an artist, if not, you know, sexy and young and kind of this like manic, pixie, spontaneous thing?" Can you be a great, wholesome, amazing mom, and also a sexually independent, self-actualized individual?

(Synth)

Halsey: There's like a constant battle between, you know, having your autonomy and your independence, and also being a great parent to this tiny little thing that depends on you entirely. Underneath all that, I found the root of my fear, which

was that, you know, for as much as I feel like a really well-rounded and worldly woman on the outside, there's a little girl still inside of me who's like, "I don't know if I know how to be somebody's mom." And what ended up happening was like, none of that mattered. I can articulate that he's the greatest thing that's ever happened. And all of the chaos, all of the dust settled and, you know, I was exactly where I wanted to be. So it's tongue-in-cheek in the beginning, "Well, you asked for this," and then, you know, by the end, it's more tender and cathartic, and it's "Well, I asked for this...and then I got it."

(Synth ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "You Asked for This" by Halsey, in its entirety.

("You Asked for This" by HALSEY)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net/halsey. You'll find links to stream or download "You Asked for This," and you can watch the video. This episode was made by me with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show at Song Exploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.