

**Song Exploder**  
**Hozier - Nina Cried Power**  
**Episode 151**

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

*("Nina Cried Power" by HOZIER ft. MAVIS STAPLES)*

Thao: Andrew Hozier-Byrne is a Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter from Ireland. His debut single from 2013, "Take Me to Church," was a massive, multi-platinum hit. In September 2018, Hozier released the song "Nina Cried Power," which features the legendary gospel singer Mavis Staples. In this episode, Hozier breaks down how he made the song, and Mavis Staples tells the story of how she got involved.

*("Nina Cried Power" by HOZIER ft. MAVIS STAPLES)*

Andrew: My name is Andrew Hozier-Byrne, I go by Hozier.

*(Music fades out)*

Andrew: Early 2017, after tour, I moved back into the countryside near where my family is from, and kind of was living alone in a bungalow in County Wicklow in Ireland, which is just where the countryside begins near the coast. And was kind of taking some time out and I was getting back into the writing process. I fell into kind of a late night sleep schedule, where I'd work until, you know, 3, 4, 5 in the morning and sleep until whatever time. Late one night in Wicklow, I just was playing around with some dark chords in a minor key on this piano I had in the house.

*(Piano)*

Andrew: For a certain type of ballad maybe it seems to be a place I [laughter] tend to go to, but I might just be a sucker for dark piano sound.

*(Piano)*

*(Piano ends)*

Andrew: I fell on, I think, a chord progression, and then just one sort of couplet, one sort of lyrical idea of, "It's not the waking, it's the rising."

*(Vocals along with piano: "It's not the waking, it's the rising")*

*(Piano continues)*

Andrew: It was just this kind of tongue in cheek inquiry into language of political awareness that we hear kind of bandied around on social media about being woke and the language of wokeness, et cetera. Being aware and being conscious of an issue, which affects people negatively and could change, that is a very, very positive thing. But there is the awareness of something, and then there is the actual doing of something about it. There is the first step of being awake and then there is the second step of actually getting out of bed.

*(Vocals along with piano: "It is the grounding of a foot uncompromising / It's not forgoing of the lie / It's not the opening of eyes / It's not the waking, it's the rising")*

Andrew: That first night, I didn't achieve much more than a few rattly verses. I recorded them into a session. And they were kind of jangling around in my pockets for a while until the rest of the song started to make sense. I was making the demo in a room in my house. This room had a bathroom off of it with a shower. So late in the night, like 2, 3 in the morning when you're stuck with an idea, I would just point the monitor, say, into the bathroom and just take a long-ass shower. When you're fishing for an idea, it's always when your brain is out. So I would just loop the verses over and over and over and over again, and then, you know, give yourself 20 minutes or an hour away from it and some seed will be planted. At some point, I'd hammered out a rhythm in my head. Something that leaned in a certain way, and then I was looking through loads of loops that kind of carried the same gate, or had that same kind of locomotive momentum to it. And found a loop.

*(Demo drum loop)*

Andrew: And it was sort of a placeholder until we recorded the drums. In the demo, I'm getting the broad strokes out of the way and getting the arrangement stuff out of the way. So like, you know, what guitar part might come in, or bass part might come in. What are the backing vocals doing, what are the harmonies doing here?

*(Demo track)*

Andrew: So, there were these verses, “It’s not the talking, it’s the doing,” et cetera. But, you know, what’s to be done? Like what is worth doing? I was trying to find a reason for the song.

*(Demo fades)*

Andrew: In the last few years in Ireland, there was a huge amount of social changes, which were delivered by people pushing for change that they felt was necessary and long overdue, like the equal right to marriage for the LGBTQ community and women's reproductive rights. And it has been really inspiring to kind of watch it happen and watch people help deliver that change. But also there was this frustration in me, because I was watching this eye-rolling, and this fatigue set in, this vilifying of protestors. You'll often find that it's from communities that are unaffected by issues that affect other communities. It's always, “This is just them acting up,” or, “This is attention seeking for attention seeking sake,” or whatever. So essentially it became a song that was trying to credit protest and the spirit of protest, and the spirit of direct action, and everything that has given us throughout history.

*(Piano)*

Andrew: “I could cry power” is the mission statement of the song. So basically, to cry power into the face of institutionalized power.

*(Vocals along with piano: “And I could cry power, power”)*

*(Piano)*

Andrew: That was definitely a linchpin thing for me, is going, “Okay, this is why, like this justifies the song.”

*(Piano)*

Andrew: But I thought about abandoning this song time and time again. I sat on that song for so long going like, “No, like this is way too much. It's too soap-boxy. No one wants to hear this.” And then I thought, you know, we are wealthy with this legacy of work by really, really fantastic and brave artists who just sang about

and wrote about what felt important to them. You know, when Woody Guthrie was writing songs about fascists, did he think twice about it? When Joni Mitchell is writing about the destruction of the natural world for profiteering, et cetera, did she stop and think, “This is too preachy?” It was like, well look here is a list of artists that, did they overthink this, or did they just stand up and sing about what they felt was important to sing about? And then the rest of that chorus kicked in. And the decision to put the artists in it, that was a big part of it.

*(Vocals along with piano: “Power, Lord / Nina cried power / Lennon cried power / James Brown cried power”)*

Andrew: Nina Simone was one of those artists that just switched a light on in me for a lot of reasons. Not just for her voice and the songs that she wrote, and how she sang them, but just making me think about what a song is. But also, there was this “Sinnerman” reference.

*(“Sinnerman” Nina Simone version)*

Thao: “Sinnerman” is a traditional African American spiritual. It’s been recorded by a bunch of artists. Nina Simone recorded a version on her 1965 album *Pastel Blues*.

Andrew: When I was a kid discovering soul music and jazz music for the first time, I used to listen to that before class at like 14, 15, just fascinated that that’s an eight or nine-minute piece of music, and that’s one take.

*(“Sinnerman” Nina Simone version)*

Andrew: And then there is that literal Nina Simone crying of “power.”

*(“Sinnerman” Nina Simone version)*

*(Music fades out)*

Andrew: I don’t think it was a conscious reference at the beginning of it. But once that awareness set in, it just made sense for the song to be named “Nina Cried Power.”

*(Vocals along with piano: “Power, Lord / Nina cried power / Billie cried power / Mavis cried power”)*

Andrew: Mavis Staples was a member of The Staples Singers. Somebody who is so central to this incredible linchpin moment in western democracy, somebody who sang after Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches during the Civil Rights Movement. I mean I didn't think that I'd be on her radar at all. But I had heard that she was singing part of "Take Me To Church" in one of her sets.

Thao: "Take Me To Church" was Hozier's debut single.

Andrew: So she liked the song. And it was always in my head, like if I don't get a chance to work with Mavis at some point, I'll never forgive myself. So when this song came to fruition it was like, "Yeah, this is a no-brainer."

Mavis: When he called me to sing this song with him, he really made me a happy soul. Every part of the song made my skin tingle on my bones. My first reaction was just loving it.

Andrew: I flew to Chicago and we spent a day and talked about the song and I also wanted to make sure that she was cool with the lyrics and what the sentiment of the song was about. I was with her in the vocal booth for a little time, and then we just wrote in what we thought would sound great and everything clicked into place. The kind of roof just came off the song a little bit.

*(Mavis vocals along with piano: "And I could cry power, power")*

*(Hozier vocals along with piano: "Power, Lord")*

*(Mavis vocals: "Curtis cried power / Patti cried power / Nina cried power")*

Andrew: The song is just a different thing with Mavis on it. I just have great admiration for Mavis as an artist, and also I just see her as a bit of a hero and a legend. There was also just the overwhelming feeling of like having written something that Mavis is singing on, and seeing her sing on it. There was one line in particular that she really loved, which is the, "I could cry power / Power has been cried by those stronger than me / Straight into the face that tells you to / Rattle your chains if you love being free."

Mavis: That verse just went all through me. I felt it very strongly.

Andrew: I was like, "Take it, please. You know [laughter], please sing that." And her performance on that line in particular I think is just really spectacular. It's just so Mavis.

*(Mavis vocals: "And I could cry power / Power has been cried by those stronger than me / Straight into the face that tells you to / Rattle your chains [laughter] if you love being free")*

Thao: Right after you say, "Rattle your chains," you give a little laugh.

Mavis: [Laughter] Well, it sounds like laughter but actually it was the spirit, you know [laughter]. The spirit hits you, you know, sometime when you're singing a great song. I'm a gospel singer first. That's home for me. And whatever you hear me sing, if it's a love song, if it's a country song, you gonna hear some gospel in it.

Andrew: As she was getting into the vibe of it, we stood on either side of the glass, her in the vocal booth, me in the live room outside of it. Both of us had headphones on, both of us had microphones. And we just traded and riffed, doing the chorus section and just working off each other's energy, which was amazing, that was just a surreal experience.

*(Mavis and Hozier vocals: "James cried power / Lennon cried power / Patti cried power / Billie, power / Dylan, power / Woody, power / Nina cried power")*

Andrew: We recorded the drums in London.

*(Live drums)*

Andrew: The drum performance is by Rory Doyle, who tours with me. And we shaped it around what was on the demo.

*(Demo drums)*

Andrew: And then just kind of took them off the leash.

*(Live drums)*

Andrew: He has quite a heavy hand, he really hits the drums.

*(Live drums)*

Andrew: That's pretty wild.

*(Live drums)*

*(Live drums end)*

Andrew: I did a lot of backing vocals, a lot of the choir sounds, and we looked into getting some vocalists to put a female tone into the choir, so it sounded more like a choir, and less like my attempt at a choir.

*(Choir)*

Andrew: And then the organ parts. That's a whole 'nother story so when I was on the road last year, I received a message on Twitter from Booker T. Jones.

*("Green Onions" by BOOKER T. & THE M.G.'S)*

Andrew: He had said basically, "If you ever want to collaborate on something, I'd be totally up for it." And I was like, you know, "What?" A lot of his work is the reason why I just fell in love with music to the extent that I did. In the first band I was ever in at 14, we used to cover Booker T. & the M.G.'s.

*(Music ends)*

Andrew: So this was a big deal for me. We had a week with him playing B3 across the album, which was just a dream. You know, and just amazing getting to see him work.

*(Organ)*

Andrew: We kind of played around with getting these lovely glassy, ghostly, clean organ tones.

*(Organ)*

Andrew: And when played with the choir sounds,

*(Organ along with choir)*

Andrew: you don't know where one begins and where the other ends.

*(Organ along with choir)*

Andrew: We just really fell into loving that sound.

*(Organ along with backing vocals: "Power, power, power")*

Mavis: This song is a history song. It's a song about letting the youngsters, the new generation know

*(Tambourine and claps join)*

Mavis: where it all comes from. And all of these artists that we're calling out have contributed songs of freedom.

Andrew: And it was vital that they did it. And it was so important to the causes that they were involved in and that they felt strongly about. And if we didn't have that example, we would be bankrupt in so many ways. So this song, I wanted it to be this thank you note to that.

*(Music ends)*

Thao: And now, here is "Nina Cried Power," by Hozier ft. Mavis Staples, in its entirety.

*("Nina Cried Power" by HOZIER ft. MAVIS STAPLES)*

Thao: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information on Hozier and Mavis Staples. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. 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](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.