

Song Exploder
Ibeyi - Deathless
Episode 116

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.

("Deathless" by IBEYI)

Hrishikesh: The band Ibeyi is made up of twin sisters, Naomi Diaz and Lisa-Kaindé Diaz. When they were only teenagers, they were signed to a record deal by Richard Russell, who had previously signed artists like Adele and Vampire Weekend to his label, XL Recordings. He also co-produces their records. In this episode, Naomi and Lisa-Kaindé take apart their 2017 Ibeyi song, "Deathless."

("Deathless" by IBEYI)

(Music fades)

Naomi: My name is Naomi Diaz, and I'm the percussionist, and I produce.

Lisa: My name is Lisa-Kaindé, and I play the piano, and I sing, and I write the songs. So this song starts about this racist encounter I had when I was 16 with a policeman. It was in Paris, I was in the subway going to my piano class. And I have a cop saying, "What's your name?" I had never been stopped by a cop before, so I'm like, "Hi! [laughter] I'm Lisa-Kaindé Diaz," and he's like, "Do you smoke?" And I said, "No!" "Do you use drugs?" And I said, "No," and every time, he would, like, come closer to my face. And then he said, "Do you drink?" And I said "No," which is true. I don't smoke, I don't drink, and I don't use drugs. And then, he came even closer, and he said, "Are you fucking kidding me?!"

Naomi: He makes you take your shoes off, your socks. She was barefoot in the subway.

Lisa: And then what happened is he took my bag and threw everything that was in it on the floor, and then he realized I was reading a big book, and he saw a partition of Chopin, because I was going to my music class. And then he froze, and I think he thought, *She might have a little bit of intelligence*. So he stop, gave me my empty bag in my hand, and left. And when you're 16, you

understand there's something wrong in what happened. And you're shaken, but you don't understand why. And it's only when I went back to my mother, and I said to her what had happened, and she turned red and started almost crying, and I understood that, *yeah, that was not something that was supposed to happen to me*. It's been six years since this happened. So we decided that we were going to write a song about it.

(Beat)

Lisa: The production starts with just us jamming in the studio with our producer Richard Russell, and just playing music, and playing around, and trying to find something interesting.

Naomi: Richard is our producer. He is also the head of XL Recordings, our label.

Lisa: Naomi and Richard would spend hours just playing with every drum machine they have in the studio. And I would be like [singing], "Guys,

Naomi: [laughter]

Lisa: let's stop now!

Naomi: [laughter]

Lisa: Please [laughter]!"

Naomi: [laughter]

(Beat ends)

Naomi: Then I did some Batás,

(Batá drum)

Naomi: which is like drums from Cuba that I play on stage. And normally, it's in skin, but I played wood Batás.

Lisa: Part of the Ibeyi sound is that we always mix drum machine

(Beat)

Lisa: and, actually, real drums.

(Batá drum joins)

Lisa: Mixing wood, which is what Naomi uses, and electronic sound.

(Music ends)

Naomi: Our father was one of the greatest

("Bodas de Oro" by BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB ft. RUBÉN GONZÁLEZ & JESÚS RAMOS)

Naomi: Latin Jazz percussionists ever.

Hrishikesh: Their father's Cuban musician, Miguel Angá Diaz.

Naomi: He was playing with Buena Vista Social Club,

("Bodas de Oro" by BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB ft. RUBÉN GONZÁLEZ & JESÚS RAMOS)

Naomi: playing congas and cajón.

Hrishikesh: He passed away in 2006.

(Music ends)

Naomi: I don't remember this day, but everybody says that I started playing cajón the day after my father died. So I was 11.

Lisa: I remember everything of that day, actually. And I remember what I was wearing, and I remember what she was wearing.

Naomi: I don't remember that at all.

Lisa: The reason why I remember it so well is because it was not like, you know, a kid that would try to play cajón. She *actually* played. You know, like she did a rhythm, and it actually had the sound she has today, like it was, she hit really hard, the cajón. And we were all like, "I think the time stopped for three seconds," you know? And we were like, "What is happening?"

(Batá drum)

Lisa: It was actually pretty amazing.

(Batá drum)

Lisa: And so again, the rhythm of the drum machine and the rhythm of the batá totally mix.

(Beat with Batá drum)

Lisa: And then with that start, I went back to my house, and I started writing "Deathless."

(Vocals: "He said, he said / Do you smoke? / What's your name?")

Lisa: I do believe that the beat influenced the lyrics and the way I deliver. Normally, I deliver *really* long sentences with melodies, and that time is [sings] "Do you smoke?"

(Vocals: "Do you smoke? / What's your name? / Do you know why I'm here?")

Lisa: So it's a lot more hard. And that energy of the beat made me write something harder.

(Vocals with beat: "She was, she was / Innocent, sweet sixteen / Frozen with fear")

(Beat)

Lisa: Naomi is really amazing at what she does, because she knew that giving me a beat would make me write it differently. If you would have said to me, "Write a song about that experience without a beat," I would have written it at the piano, with something totally different, and the energy would have been totally different. Me writing it with this hard beat that they did, made it stronger in a way.

(Vocals join: "Whatever happens, whatever happened")

(Beat fades)

(Vocals: "We are Deathless")

(Synth bass)

Lisa: It's super important the, bass sound, especially for that song, because it's almost the only harmonic thing that happens in the first part of the song.

(Synth bass)

Lisa: So we really work on it, and sometimes you spend loads of time trying to find a good sound and we change like [vocalizes different synth bass sounds]. Sorry, that was really bad as an explanation.

Naomi: [laughter]

Lisa: But we try like a list of billion sound of bass because it's about finding the right balance.

(Synth bass)

Lisa: It's really dramatic, really dark. And it's going up.

(Synth bass)

Lisa: So it's like building tension, what is going to happen after that? So you're building tension, building tension, and then you relax it,

(Synth bass ends)

Lisa: with just something that is groovy.

(Synth bass)

Lisa: So your body starts moving without thinking about it, but your body already starts moving, and stop being, like, tense.

(Synth bass)

(Beeping sound)

Lisa: The first thing we hear in the song is this [sings beeping sound]. That's a technique we learned with Richard. So what he does is you sing something, and he would take like a *tiny* piece of it, and do a rhythm with it. Then it becomes a unique sound, because it's your voice cut and repeated.

(Beeping sound fades)

Naomi: Texture's important.

(Drone)

Lisa: And what is important in that drone is that even if you don't hear it, it's there, the texture of an alarm or of a siren. And we, as a matter of fact, tried to take it off, and we had to put it back, because it was essential.

(Drone fades)

Hrishikesh: I asked them about a sound that I couldn't figure out.

Hrishikesh: What is this track?

(Processed laughter)

Naomi: Ahhhh!

Lisa: Ahhhh! Wait, wait, yeah.

Naomi: Yeah, yeah.

Lisa: So, in the studio, there's this little machine that is amazing.

Naomi: Amazing.

Lisa: It's yellow with a tiny microphone that gets out of it, and you can record your voices, and then you can speed it, so it becomes [makes high pitch sound] or you can lower it, and make it slower, and it becomes like [makes a lower pitch sound].

(Processed laughter)

Lisa: We use it a lot for texture. And that's Richard's laugh

(Processed laughter)

Lisa: pitched down.

(Processed laughter)

(Saxophone)

Lisa: The person that plays saxophone on this song is Kamasi Washington.

Naomi: We met him because we did a lot of festivals this summer, and we were always in the same stage, and he was always after us. So, at the end, we were like a big family, all his musicians and us, like we were just hanging out, because we were always together.

Lisa: We knew, hearing "Deathless" at one point, it became like

Naomi: Kamasi, Kamasi, Kamasi [laughter].

Lisa: inevitable for the three of us that we needed Kamasi in this song. And we knew he would fill the song. We knew he would not disappoint like it was, there were no way it would not work.

Naomi: Yeah. We sent him the track and he said, "Yes of course," and then he did it. It was pretty, really natural.

(Saxophone)

Lisa: That was the last thing that actually made the song.

Naomi: When Kamasi sent this, it was like, "We have the song!"

(Saxophone)

(Saxophone ends)

Lisa: So the idea of the song was based on a personal story, and I thought the song was going to be about that, about my personal experience. And then, through

really quickly changed and became not only about my personal experience, but also about the world, which I could have said, "I am deathless, I am," but I think the fact that suddenly it was like "we," and it was the whole world, and it was for everybody made it even more like powerful for us to sing. Normally, when we need a choir like in other songs, when there's choirs, it's just Naomi and I, and we just layer our voices a lot.

(Vocals: "Whatever happens, whatever happened")

Lisa: And we love using that technique. But for that particular song, it was really important to have other people's voice, to have other people singing it with us. So, for the first time, we got to work with a choir and to direct a choir. And the choir was quite incredible. But because, you know, they are professionals, they know how to sing really well, they know how to harmonize, so they come into the studio and they sing perfectly. But I was like, "No, no, you don't have to sing it perfectly. You have to sing it like you're there, you have to believe in it!" But they don't know you, they don't know your story, they don't know the song. And then, you have to explain the song to them, and then, you have to show them, and you have to like, make them understand what you want to say. And I think the more you try to be perfect in your vocals, the more you lose that, you know, visceral energy. So we had to work to make them sing it like they believed it.

Naomi: We made them close their eyes, and we made them scream sometimes [laughter], and really feel it.

(Choir: "Ohhhh, hey / We are deathless")

Lisa: When I was a child, I wanted to sing super well. And then, for the first time, I discovered Nina Simone, and then I realized, "Oh my god, it's not just about the voice!"

Naomi: Yeah [laughter].

Lisa: It's about what you say and the way you say it. And it's about believing in every single word that get out of your mouth. Or it won't show in the album."

(Choir: "We are deathless")

Lisa: To see all of those human beings singing "We are deathless" was actually really powerful.

(Vocals: "Ahhh")

Lisa: We wanted to write this little anthem for everybody. And we wanted to write this song that would be against this feeling of being powerless and small. And we wanted a song that would make you *feel* big. And feel full of energy, and life, and the fire that makes you want to do something.

(Choir "We are deathless")

Lisa: You know Nina Simone said, "You know what's freedom? No fear." And I think that's what "Deathless" means too.

(Vocals: "Ahhh")

Lisa: It's a way to give hope to people. There's awful things happening in the world, there's loads of people getting killed, and then you're like who's going to protect me? Those people are supposed to protect all of us, and why are they attacking me? And there's nothing worse than that, saying to yourself, "It hurts me but I cannot do anything about it." And so, "Deathless" is a way to say "You can! We can! We can do something about it!" This is not the end of us.

(Vocals: "Ahhh")

(Vocals end)

(Backing vocals)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Deathless," by Ibeyi, in its entirety.

("Deathless" by IBEYI)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/ibeyi to learn more about the band. You can also play around with the stems for "Deathless" yourself through a project I've developed with Google called Inside Music. It lets you step inside a song and hear the stems all around you. You can turn the different tracks on and off, and if you have a VR headset, you can even experience the song that way. It's really cool, check it out at g.co/insidemusic. In addition to Ibeyi, there are songs by Phoenix, Perfume Genius, Natalia Lafourcade, Clipping, and more. Again, it's g.co/insidemusic, and I'll have a link to that on the Song Exploder site too.

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