

Song Exploder
Japanese Breakfast - Boyish
Episode 152

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.

("Boyish" by JAPANESE BREAKFAST)

Hrishikesh: Just a heads up for any parents who listen with their kids, there's some maybe PG-13 stuff in this episode. Nothing major, but use your discretion.

Thao: Japanese Breakfast is the musical project of Michelle Zauner, who's been making music under that name since 2013. In July 2017, she released her second album, *Soft Sounds from Another Planet*. In this episode, Michelle breaks down a song from that album called "Boyish," along with her co-producer and bandmate Craig Hendrix. We'll hear the original demo, plus a version Michelle recorded with her old band. And she'll talk about how her perspective on the song has changed over the years.

("Boyish" by JAPANESE BREAKFAST)

Michelle: I'm Michelle Zauner and my band is called Japanese Breakfast.

(Music fades out)

Michelle: The first version of "Boyish" was written and recorded in June of 2013. I was in another band called Little Big League and we were just starting to work on our second album. But I felt creatively stifled. So I started this sort of like lo-fi recording project called *June*, which was actually the first thing I ever made as Japanese Breakfast, where I wrote and recorded songs every day for the month of June, so at the end there were like 30 tracks of material. And "Boyish" started as "Day 6," on the project. I had like this crappy Casio or Yamaha keyboard. And I was just recording the drum beat from the speaker.

("Day 6" demo beat)

Michelle: Because it was this exercise in "first thought, best thought," I wasn't thinking too much about arrangement and production because I was just, I have a couple hours to just throw mud at [laughter] the wall and see what sticks.

(Demo vocals along with guitar and drum beat: “Your boyish reassurance is not reassuring / And I need it”)

Michelle: The song is largely about insecurity. And wanting so badly for someone to love you [laughter]. When I wrote it, I was involved with someone who had kept me in like the friendzone for a very long time and even when we had started dating, I felt very insecure in that relationship, I felt very unworthy.

(Demo vocals along with guitar and drum beat: “I can’t get you off my mind / I can’t get you off in general”)

Michelle: I’ve always written about sex a lot. It’s such a easy way to look at the dynamics of a relationship, of what’s working and what’s not working and who has power and who doesn’t. And it’s also just like very much the way that I was feeling, you know. And I think that a lot of time women are sort of like, we’re made to feel like neutered from sexuality, or not feel autonomy over our own sexualities. But I’ve just never found that to be realistically the case. It’s always something that’s on my mind, and something that in that relationship, in particular, was really an important part of that dynamic.

(Demo ends)

Michelle: Once I was done with *June*, I was surprised to find that I actually really enjoyed most of the material and it ended up being a lot of really great sort of raw source material to draw on. And so, I kind of decided to revisit that song with my old band Little Big League. But like, we really struggled with that song. The arrangement was just really clunky. In Little Big League, everyone wrote their own parts.

(Little Big League version intro)

Michelle: And we just couldn’t get it right.

(Little Big League version: “Your boyish reassurance is not reassuring”)

Michelle: It was just a mess. And I was just never really happy with it but it still ended up on the Little Big League album cause I felt like as a song it still had something to offer.

(Little Big League version fades)

Michelle: And so when I started working on *Soft Sounds from Another Planet* and thinking about what songs I wanted to have on there, I had re-listened to the “Day 6” from *June* version of “Boyish” that I had done years before.

(“Day 6” demo including guitar and drum beat)

Michelle: And that was what inspired me to open it back up again. Because I felt like it was more true to my vision of what that song should be. So I reached back out to the Little Big League guys and I was like, “You know, I really felt like this song could have another chance, and is it okay if I re-record it?” And got permission from the three of them to rearrange it with Craig Hendrix.

(Demo ends)

Craig: I’m Craig Hendrix, I co-produced *Soft Sounds from Another Planet*.

Michelle: The two of us played everything on the record. Craig plays drums in the live band and he actually produced the first Little Big League album.

Craig: And I had heard the *June* cassette and hearing the vocal melody and the lyrics, it was really easy to believe in the song right from the very beginning.

Michelle: For me, like the song has a really classic, old time energy, like big band arrangement feel like Ronettes, “Be My Baby.”

(“Be My Baby” by THE RONETTES)

Craig: The 60s reverbs sound so good on those records. The drums in particular.

(“Be My Baby” by THE RONETTES)

Craig: So the idea of doing a sort of like an homage style production in the spirit of the 60s bands that Michelle and I really love, was there pretty quickly.

(Music fades out)

Craig: So, on this song we broke the kit down and had like a couple toms, two different snare drums.

(Drums)

Craig: And just sort of mic'd them from further back to try and get a more roomy sound.

(Drums)

Craig: Trying to emulate those chamber reverbs from the 60s. And then there's also additional toms and snares that come in just for the choruses that have like slightly different reverbs on them.

(Drums)

Craig: It was sort of like between a drum set and like a more orchestral-sounding percussion section.

(Drums along with percussion)

(Drums along with percussion end)

Craig: With a lot of bands from the 60s, the harpsichord occasionally pops up.

(Harpsichord)

Craig: There's something about the rhythmic quality and the sharpness of it that I think sits well with the style of production as far as it being like, classic and romantic.

(Drums and percussion join)

(Music ends)

Craig: Michelle's writing, lyrically, was actually the first thing that drew me to wanting to work with her as an artist. Back in the Little Big League days, I remember reading the liner notes and being really, really taken by the quality and grip that the lyrics had.

Michelle: I think I really enjoy writing songs sort of like vignettes or short stories. I studied creative writing in college and I read a lot of dirty realist writers, like Raymond Carver and Richard Ford. They focused on these like really specific, small scenes in a moment. And that's my style of writing in a way of just taking a

microscope to the ordinary, and evaluating it. You know, it also comes from like I didn't grow up in a family where I was surrounded by books. Neither one of my parents went to college. So I don't have this like tremendous vocabulary, but I feel like I'm able to recognize meaningful moments.

(Vocals along with guitar: "I can't get you off my mind / You can't get yours off the hostess / Watched her lips reserving tables / As my ugly mouth kept running")

(Guitar ends)

Michelle: You know, this song started as like such a release of these desperate feelings, like anger and so much jealousy and insecurity. But, when I revisited this song, when we started working on *Soft Sounds from Another Planet*, I was able to acknowledge that it was somewhat melodramatic, you know. It was less about like, "This person wronged me," and more of just like, "This is how in my head I was about, feeling like so jealous and insecure in this moment." And I also like wrote the song before I went through this like really heavy stuff in my life, my mom passing away. So coming out the other end of going through like all this trauma and then revisiting this song that in retrospect doesn't feel like it's about a very serious thing in life, I think that I was able to play into like that sort of melodrama, and create an arrangement that feels like it conveys that sort of new perspective. So, in the choruses, it was very important to me that it feels like you're being like rushed into it, or lifted into it. So we kind of chased that feeling and loaded up those choruses with a lot of synth strings.

(Synth strings and harp)

Craig: And there's like harp in there too that has some delay on it, that adds a sort of magical quality.

Michelle: It just like really corresponds with the feelings that I was trying to convey.

(Harmonized vocals along with strings: "I can't get you off my mind")

(Harmonized vocals: "I can't get you off in general")

Michelle: Those harmonies are largely Craig's arrangement.

(Harmonized vocals: "here we are, we're just two losers")

Craig: Vocal harmonies are among my favorite things that exist in the world of music. The first cassette I ever had was a Beach Boys *Greatest Hits*. And, on this song, the style in which they're sung harkens to the Beach Boys a little bit.

(Harmonized vocals: "I want you and you want something more beautiful")

Craig: As far as the background vocals are concerned, we took an approach that was more about making a wider, broader sound rather than just complimenting a melody.

(Backing vocals)

Michelle: A lot of those harmonies came from Craig playing a note [laughter] in the headphones to help guide me through it. They swell in such a beautiful way in the choruses.

(Backing vocals)

(Backing vocals end)

Michelle: And then Craig played the guitar solo.

Craig: The vocal melody's so strong that there was no need to really come up with new musical material. So the solo is just basically the vocal melody, played in that sort of romantic 50s or 60s school dance sound with the tremolo'd amplifier and kind of a lower register.

(Guitar solo)

Michelle: In the Little Big League version there is this bridge that doesn't exist anymore and we replaced. It was almost like too telling of the story. And to like replace that with a guitar solo, it does such a better job of explaining what you're supposed to feel.

(Guitar solo ends)

Michelle: This song's so much about feeling very intensely, and I miss feeling that much.

(Guitar)

Michelle: I miss being a teenager, a young adult, and feeling like this was like the most important moment in the world, before recognizing all the other really serious stuff that exists in life. After you like deal with death and trauma and losing a very important person in your life, you look at, you know, how you felt as a teenager, and you kind of long for that pain. I think that's kind of like a new feeling. And I really like the way that that feeling was captured on this song.

(Guitar ends)

Thao: And now, here is “Boyish,” by Japanese Breakfast, in its entirety.

(“Boyish” by JAPANESE BREAKFAST)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information on Japanese Breakfast. 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. 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.