

Song Exploder
Julien Baker - Appointments
Episode 127

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.

("Appointments" by JULIEN BAKER)

Hrishikesh: Julien Baker is from Memphis, Tennessee. She released her second album, *Turn Out The Lights*, in October 2017, on Matador Records. The *New York Times* called her music "devastating," and *Pitchfork* gave the album Best New Music. In this episode, Julien tells the story of her song "Appointments," and how writing it helped her work through her thoughts around addiction, depression, and relationships. Julien also takes apart the track "Over," which was originally written as part of "Appointments," but then split off as a separate track.

("Appointments" by JULIEN BAKER)

Julien: I'm Julien Baker.

(Music fades out)

Julien: Do you ever think to say something and then you know that you should not say that thing out loud? When that happens to me or I know that a thought is irrational, I'll just save it and explore it in a song. Like I felt an inadequacy and like an imposter syndrome when I would talk to my friends or when I would be at a party just standing around. I would just have this bizarre paranoia that like, "I'm not what any of these people wanted, and I'm disappointing, and I'm letting everyone down." And that recurring thought was I think probably the first idea that cropped up in my brain, for the lyrics. "I know that I'm not what you wanted."

(Vocals: "I know that I'm not what you wanted, am I?")

Julien: "Appointments" materialized around the weeks in which I was starting to figure out ways to be more proactive about dealing with recovery and mental health. Like actually going to therapy and actually taking care of myself. I was sitting on my couch in my apartment in Tennessee, and creating a chord progression and improvising on top of it. This is the voice memo I made in my house.

(Voice memo)

Julien: You can hear me stepping on the looping pedal.

(Voice memo)

Julien: It's just a continuous loop of that, and then I place all the chords on top of it.

(Voice memo)

Julien: So I play a chord progression, and then as they're getting recorded to the loop, they build on top of each other, and I just noodle around in this reverberant landscape. Improvisation is a very special and therapeutic place in its own way. To just sit with a guitar and play for 45 minutes of uninterrupted sound just transports you to somewhere else. It's a really nice refuge from constant consciousness, and thought that's bombarding you always.

(Voice memo)

Julien: The lyrical content is derived from actual conversations that I had with loved ones about feeling the immense isolation that results from living inside your own head, and fear that you'll always feel isolated. And not being able to express that to another person.

(Voice memo fades)

Julien: I was thinking over the conversations that I had had in the last week. Allowing myself to confront thoughts that I'm having that I know are irrational. The line, "You should try not to miss any more appointments," was something that was said to me.

(Vocals: "I should just try not to miss any more appointments")

Julien: Having someone say that, and that being the only thing that can be offered in the way of comfort or encouragement, felt like empty and very fragile. And I remember being disappointed in that phrase and thinking, it's so detached and sterile, and has nothing in the way of empathy attached to it. It was intended to be caring, but I think also when you're in that isolated mindset, it's difficult to not view things as a personal attack. And of course, now that I'm two years

removed from that, I understand how nuanced and delicate those situations are, and how no one really knows what to offer another human being. And that's the crux of the whole record. But, for this song, it's still in a place where neither person is being understood.

(Guitar)

Julien: So I have the raw material of my thoughts, and then I go back and just let the thoughts kind of tumble over until they settle into where they're supposed to go.

(Vocals along with guitars and synth loop: "I'm staying in tonight / I won't stop you from leaving / I know that I'm not what you wanted, am I?")

(Music fades)

Julien: So we ended up recording it at Ardent Studios in Memphis. The engineer Calvin Lauber is a long time friend of mine. I ended up being most comfortable with the idea of recording with Calvin, because it seemed like the most conducive to the creative process was going to be the environment, much more than the equipment, that I felt ease with the person who was recording the record.

(Guitars)

Julien: I play a Fender Telecaster. And we tracked all the parts separately.

(Guitars end)

Julien: The reason why we did it is so we could manipulate all of those separately, instead of just having one chunk of guitar.

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: "Appointments" is the second track on Julien Baker's album. The first is an instrumental called "Over" but there's no gap between the two tracks. "Over" acts as the intro to "Appointments."

Julien: So originally, "Over" and "Appointments" were all one song, that I then chopped up.

Hrishikesh: So for the purposes of this episode, I'm considering the two tracks as one composition. So I asked Julien to tell me about "Over" as well.

Julien: The very first thing that you hear, where the studio door closes,

(Sound of studio door closing)

Julien: is an attempt to place you inside the experience of sitting down to create these songs.

(Sound of footsteps along with jingling keys)

Julien: You hear me and my carabiner walk over and sit down at the piano.

(Sound of Julien sitting down)

Julien: "Over" begins with a version of the opening lead part of "Appointments."

(Guitar)

Julien: But in the relative minor.

(Piano)

Julien: This minor piano riff, darker, more brooding.

(Piano)

Julien: And then, one of my friends, Cameron Boucher,

(Piano fades)

(Clarinet)

Julien: came down to play woodwinds.

(Saxophone joins)

Julien: It's clarinet and then sax.

(Clarinet along with saxophone fades)

Julien: And then, Camille Faulkner plays violin.

(Violin)

Julien: And it all just sounds kind of crystalline. Like all these sounds just floating around you.

(Clarinet and saxophone join)

(Violin along with clarinet and saxophone end)

Julien: And then, Camille and I just sat down at the piano, and I played the chords and the riff, and we worked out this turnaround that would take the chord progression in the minor, and have it end up in a major key.

(Piano)

Julien: I wanted it to feel like there was a lot of tension. And then for it to resolve and dissipate into the

(Transition from "Over" into "Appointments")

Julien: very first notes of "Appointments," which is in the major key.

(Piano)

(Guitar joins as piano fades)

Julien: A negative emotion into a positive emotion.

(Guitar)

Julien: And so I wanted for that tiny arc that occurs within "Over" to indicate how the rest of the record would flow, from despair into provisional hope.

(Vocals along with guitar: "Maybe it's all gonna turn out alright / And I know that it's not")

(Vocals: "but I have to believe that it is")

Julien: A lot of how we processed the vocals was also based on mimicking emotion being told in the verbal lyrical part. The record is all told in first person, but is an attempt to locate the self in relation to where you are inside your own head. So in the a cappella part, there's multiple harmonies singing different lyrics. The lyrics are, "Maybe it's gonna turn out alright, probably not, I know that it's not." You've got affirmation, "Yes, it will be okay," "No, it won't be okay," and then you've got uncertainty, all of those things being spoken simultaneously. They're all located at different places. The speaking voice changes its location in the mix to give you the sense that all of these thoughts are happening concurrently, fighting for attention, and competing to be heard.

(Vocal lines: "I have to believe it, I have to believe it / I know that it's not gonna turn out alright / I have to believe that it is / Probably not, but I have to believe that it is")

Julien: The vocals are being executed in this desperate and almost erratic way, when I'm admitting that to say to someone, "Everything's fine, everything is going to be fine," is more for my benefit. That's something that I'm pretending to be more confident about. And so, I want to convey it in a dramatic way.

(Lead vocals along with harmonies: "And when I tell you that it is / Oh, it's more for my benefit / Maybe it's all gonna turn out all right / Oh, know that it's not, but I have to believe that it is")

Julien: Turning a cyclical, negative thought pattern into a refrain or a chorus is liberating.

(Piano)

Julien: Writing songs was part of the healing process itself.

(Piano)

Julien: I mean for a while, I felt like I was in a fish tank.

(Piano)

Julien: Because I was just experiencing this sadness and constant anxiety that I wasn't dealing with, but I was just living inside of and I just, it felt like I could do nothing else but inhabit it, and the music is supposed to be a, a vehicle for expelling those things from my mind, or at least just admitting them. I don't purport to

have like everything figured out, and that's why singing about hopefulness on this record is very tentative. It's like a provisional hope.

(Backing vocals)

Julien: No matter how small the pinhole of light is, it's entirely possible that within the next day, or the next week, or the next month, that we could feel closer to something like joy.

(Backing vocals)

(Piano)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Over" and "Appointments," by Julien Baker.

("Over" and "Appointments" by JULIEN BAKER)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Julien Baker.

Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Carlos Lerma creates original illustrations for each episode of the podcast, which you can see on the website. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of creative, independent podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. If you want to share your thoughts on this episode, you can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.