

Song Exploder
Mitski - Your Best American Girl
Episode 83

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.

("Your Best American Girl" by MITSKI)

Hrishikesh: Mitski has been making records since 2012. Her newest record, *Puberty 2*, came out in June 2016, and was critically acclaimed. *Pitchfork* gave it Best New Music status. Her music has also been featured in the TV show, *Adventure Time*. In this episode, Mitski breaks down the song "Your Best American Girl," along with her long-time collaborator Patrick Hyland.

("Your Best American Girl" by MITSKI)

Mitski: My name's Mitski. My full name is Mitski Miyawaki.

(Music ends)

Mitski: I never grew up with musical instruments or with equipment to record. The way I learned to write was just writing things down on paper and hearing it in my head, and kind of hoping for the best. And I don't work in a band, so I'm alone in my own head. So the lyrics and the vocal melody are king in my songs, they always come first.

(Vocals: "If I could, I'd be your little spoon / And kiss your fingers forevermore / But big spoon, you have so much to do / And I have nothing ahead of me")

Mitski: The chorus came first. I was on a bed, and I wrote down the words, "Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me. but I do, I think I do. And you're an all-American boy, I guess I couldn't help trying to be your best American girl."

(Vocals: "Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me / But I do, I think I do / And you're an all-American boy / I guess I couldn't help trying to be your best American girl")

Mitski: I was in love with somebody, but I just felt like our backgrounds, or the places we come from, or how we were raised were just so completely different. And it

felt like something that couldn't be overcome by love. I grew up very nomadically. I grew up moving around a whole lot, and not just in the U.S. but abroad. And my mother is Japanese, and my father's American and so, I never grew up with a sense of community. My sense of family is very different. I think I grew up more with a sense of everything will be lost at some point. Like you have to prepare yourself to let go at all times because I just kept moving so much, and I kept, you know, you can only say goodbye so many times before you start to like automatically prepare yourself for that. So my upbringing was just very, very different from the average American's.

(Vocals: "You're the sun, you've never seen the night / But you hear its song from the morning birds / Well, I'm not the moon, I'm not even a star / But awake at night I'll be singing to the birds")

Mitski: I wanted to be accepted by an environment or a family situation where, you know, people lived in the same place all their lives, and knew the same people, and know where they're from, and know their place in the world. That was very foreign to me. And I didn't feel like I could learn how to be part of that.

(Bass)

Mitski: The next thing is the bassline. So it's not even the chords, it's just kind of the roots. And then, I kind of build off of that.

(Guitar)

Mitski: I picked up guitar in college, you know, so I just was too lazy to actually learn all the finger formations. And so, what I do is actually just tune the guitar to a D major chord, so that if you strum the guitar, just a D major chord immediately rings out. So I could just pick up the guitar, and play simple chord progressions without thinking about it.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Mitski: I mix things really loud in my headphones. And I think I was crouching over my guitar. So basically you can hear the click, if you listen really closely.

(Click)

(Click ends)

Mitski: Patrick is really good at layering.

(Guitars)

(Guitars end)

Patrick: Hi, I'm Patrick Hyland. And I produced and recorded and played instruments on the song.

(Synths)

(Synths fade)

Patrick: Those synths that come in, right before it hits, that was the most spontaneous thing in the song. Like the song was pretty much mixed, and almost totally done. And then I just thought the transition from the verse to the chorus was too abrupt. And so, I've thought to myself, *How can I turn this awkward moment into its own event and make it a special thing?* So with what the chords do there, this could sort of bloom into a big, lush thing right before the whole song explodes.

(Processed vocals: "Don't wait for me, I can't come")

Patrick: She sung that vocal and then, I'm manipulating the timbre. It's a formant shifter. I don't even think of it as a voice. I think of it as an instrument.

(Processed vocals: "Don't wait for me, I can't come")

(Drums)

Patrick: If you had to boil the song down to one moment, I would say it's when the first chorus hits. The intensity of that.

(Guitar and bass join)

Mitski: For most of my quote-unquote career of playing music and performing it, I've been doing it solo with either a piano or a guitar. So with literally just your voice and one instrument, your biggest asset is volume change.

(Music ends)

Mitski: So, from the beginning, like I would use drastic changes in volume, changes in tone to keep the audience's interest and keep the music going. So those things kind of become your band members.

(Vocals: "Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me / But I do, I think I do")

(Organ)

Mitski: This is a hallmark card, but really you always want what you can't have. And that all-American thing, like from the day I was born, I could not enter that. How hard I tried, I could never enter that dream. That all-American white culture is something that you, that is inherited instead of attained. And so, yes, it's a sad song, but I wanted to make sure that it reflected all of the contrasting feelings. Like you can be heartbroken about a relationship, but also from it, realize that you are you, and you're okay with who you are, or you're okay about where you came from.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Your Best American Girl," by Mitski, in its entirety.

("Your Best American Girl" by MITSKI)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Mitski and her music, including a link to buy this song.

You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.