

Song Exploder
Mobb Deep - Shook Ones, Pt. II
Episode 186

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.

("Shook Ones, Pt. II" by MOBB DEEP)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. The rappers Prodigy and Havoc met when they were still in high school in New York. Havoc grew up in Queens in Queensbridge, the biggest public housing projects in the country, and as a teenager, Prodigy lived there for a while, too. The two of them formed Mobb Deep in 1991. In 1995, they put out their second album, *The Infamous*. It was a success when it came out, but in the 25 years since it was released, the influence of the album has only grown. *Complex* named it one of the 10 best rap albums of the 90s, and *Pitchfork* gave the album a rare perfect score, 10 out of 10. *The Washington Post* called it a "masterpiece" of hardcore rap, and in *Slate*, it was called one of the best albums of the '90s, and one of the very best hip-hop albums ever made. The biggest song from the album was "Shook Ones, Pt. II." Havoc made the now-legendary beat that he and Prodigy rap over. To celebrate the 25th anniversary, Havoc told me the story of how the whole song came together. Prodigy passed away in 2017 from complications due to sickle-cell anemia, a debilitating disease that he'd battled his entire life. But the legacy of Mobb Deep lives on. A new, expanded, 25th anniversary edition of *The Infamous* just came out in April.

("Shook Ones, Pt. II" by MOBB DEEP)

Hrishikesh: The story of "Shook Ones" starts back in 1994. Here's Havoc.

Havoc: My name is Havoc, one half of the infamous Mobb Deep.

(Music fades out)

Havoc: We had just secured the deal with Loud Records. And it was like our second shot at life, you know, as far as music career goes, because we had a deal with Island 4th & Broadway, that didn't go so well, and we got dropped from the label, so we had to go back to the drawing board. But after the first record deal that didn't go so well, it inspired us, you know, it made us more hungry, you

know what I mean? Because we knew we had something. Prodigy's grandmother, you know, she was really in tune with us and seeing what we was trying to do, and she brought Prodigy some music recording equipment. It was the EPS Plus ASR 10

Hrishikesh: That's a keyboard sampler. You can record in a sample and then play it back like any other keyboard sound.

Havoc: and like some kind of like TASCAM track board with your standard microphone, and that was really it. You know, once she bought that, you know, he called me, let me know he had it out, I rushed over to Long Island immediately, went over to his crib. And I already knew that I wanted to make beats anyway, because I used to use a double cassette tape and record, repeat, record, repeat, record, rewind, record, rewind, and that was the only way that I could produce because I didn't have no money for equipment around 12, 13 years old. So finally when I got my hands on this equipment, I say "Yo, show me how you use this, how you use that, how you use this," and he started using it. And Prodigy, being like a unselfish person, he saw how passionate I was and I basically kind of like took over [laughter], you know what I'm saying like, man, it was like out of this world. And "Shook Ones Pt. I" was like one of the first beats I kind of made on that equipment.

("Shook Ones, Pt. I" by MOBB DEEP)

Havoc: The way that the chorus came about with that song is, Prodigy came up with it, inspired by our homeboy that went to high school with us, his name was Illa Ghee. He said something to P, and P came up with the hook. There's a lot of dudes out there that be fronting a lot, acting like they something that they not, and you know, we all know the reasons why people do that when they portray somebody they're not, because they just not proud of who they are. And Queensbridge, man, it's one of those places that, you know, just like a lot of city housing projects, it's really wild. You know, drug dealing going on, young kids shooting at each other, police brutality, just one of those places that you got to be strong. It could be scary but at the same time, you know, there's a lot of love out there too, you know. I mean it's a community but if you a shook one [laughter], you know what I'm saying, it will be a scary place for you to live but growing up in it, you don't look at it as a scary place, you just look at it as somewhere where you live and you just learn how to navigate.

("Shook Ones Pt. I" instrumental)

Havoc: So we made that track, you know, we felt good about it. Because we was feeling the lyrics, the chorus content for the hook, but we just felt like something was missing. Like we liked the song, we liked it. So we didn't want to scrap the song entirely, but we knew we could do better. At that point, we took all the studio equipment from Long Island, and we brought it to the projects in my apartment where I lived with my mother, brother, and sister, and, you know, I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I had to do something.

(Drums)

Havoc: One of the A&Rs, Matty C, he told me about, you know, these record conventions that they be having where they sell old vinyl and, you know, for sampling. And a lot of producers go there and I went to one of those, and, you know, found the drums for the "Shook Ones Pt. II." It was on this vinyl called Vinyl Dog.

(Drums)

Havoc: To capture the drums at this point, I acquired an MPC 60, which had only about six to eight seconds of sampling time. So once I got the drum loop now, I got something to guide me in a direction of where I really want to go, and now I'm just looking for a sample to go over it that could fit those drums.

(Drums end)

Havoc: I made the beat right in my bedroom. I had a whole bunch of records on my floor, a bunch of scratched up vinyls from some of Prodigy's grandfather's collection, some from my father's collection, because he, you know, used to DJ in the house just for fun. And you know, I was always listening to those records, and I wasn't really organized, so after I would listen to a record I would just, you know, throw it to the side, and ultimately it'd be on the floor and we'd be just walking all over them [laughter]. When I would listen to those records, I was listening specifically to find samples for the beats that I was trying to make. And one of the records I happened to pick up was Herbie Hancock, "Jessica."

("Jessica" by HERBIE HANCOCK)

Havoc: Herbie Hancock, you know, his records sound really weird, but in a good way. And I experimented with just that one little two seconds.

("Jessica" sample loops)

Havoc: I sampled into the EPS Plus. And on the EPS Plus, when you sample into it, it's like a keyboard, you could move up and down the keys and change the pitch of the sample.

(Pitched down "Jessica" sample loop)

Havoc: And if you listen closely, you can hear the pop in the records, that's how you know the records was really on the floor [laughter]. So the drums was there, and kind of made me play the keys how I played them, you understand what I'm saying?

(Pitched down "Jessica" sample loop along with drums)

Havoc: So at that point, I was like, "Okay, this is dope. It sounds dope," but I was like, "I need a bassline." So I filtered a note of the piano, isolated it, and then used that as a bass line.

(Bassline)

(Drums join)

Havoc: And now I need something to say that, "Okay, the chorus is here, or this is the intro." Because it would have just kept going and going and going and you wouldn't have heard a change.

(Bassline along with beat fade out)

Havoc: And then I came across this Quincy Jones record, another weird record. Like it's nothing about it is melodic. It was, if you listen to it, you'll know what I'm talking about.

*(*Woooo* sound)*

Havoc: Once I heard that, "Woooo," eerie sound, I said "Yeah it stands out, it's bright." When you hear it, you know something different is going on in the beat. So I just took that and said "Okay, this is going to be the chorus."

*(*Woooo* sound along with pitched down "Jessica" sample loop)*

(Drums join)

Havoc: And once I grabbed that, I was done.

*(*Woooo* sound along with pitched down "Jessica" sample loop along with drums)*

Havoc: Prodigy, when he first heard the beat, he was like excited. At that point, he was kind of living with me, in my apartment in Queensbridge. So he was, had first dibs on hearing anything that I did, so when he heard it, he was like, he was bugging, like "Oh, shit."

(Beat ends)

Havoc: You know, I couldn't tell if I was making a dope beat or not, I didn't know, you know, I'm still a new producer at that point, but something just lit up in everybody's eyes when they heard this beat. They was like, "Yo, like this is crazy." I was like, "Alright," I was like "Okay, cool," you know what I mean? Once the A&Rs heard it they was like "Yo, let's just use this for the new "Shook Ones" and let's do it over." You know, they had already been in the industry that me and Prodigy was trying to break through to, and through conversation I knew that they had good ears, so I trusted them, you know what I mean, I took their opinions seriously. I was eager to learn things, so when they would tell me certain things like "Yo, this beat's good, let's try this," I would try almost anything that they had an opinion on.

(Pitched down "Jessica" sample loop)

Havoc: And yeah, we went into the studio and that's where we re-recorded the vocals, changed the rhymes up a little bit but I wasn't really too fond of changing my lyrics. Because I didn't want to take away from what I had already made or written, so I kept mine the same.

(Second verse vocals along with pitched down "Jessica" sample loop: "And once the smoke clears, you'll be left with one in your dome / Thirteen years in the projects - my mentality is what, kid? / You talk a good one but you don't want it / Sometimes I wonder, do I deserve to live? / Or am I gonna burn in Hell for all the things I did?")

Hrishikesh: Do you remember Prodigy doing his verse? Were you there for it?

Havoc: Yeah, I was there while he was doing his verse and I was just, you know, really, for a lack of better words, amazed.

Hrishikesh: Why's that?

Havoc: Because he just changed his lyrics up, and, you know, when we first started recording together or became a group, I kind of was like writing some of his rhymes. So to see him write on his own, he blew me out the box lyrically, you understand? And people used to write his rhymes. But then when he started writing his own rhymes, he was better than everybody. When he comes in he's like "I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous. You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers," then he's going on about "I'll stab your brain with your nose bone," it's like, I'm like, this kid was coming from somewhere deep.

(First verse vocals along with drums and bass: "I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous / You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers / The Mobb comes equipped for warfare, beware / Of my crime family who got 'nough shots to share / For all of those who wanna profile and pose / Rock you in your face, stab your brain with your nose bone / You all alone in these streets, cousin / Every man for they self in this land we be gunnin' / And keep them shook crews runnin', like they supposed to / They come around, but they never come close to")

Havoc: You know, from the gate, I already knew that he had sickle cell, you know, shortly after meeting him. I really didn't know what the disease was. I heard of it before, but never had no experience in knowing anybody that had it, personally. But I saw that he would end up in the hospital a lot, and I knew it was painful for him. It was the number one influencer. It really made him not give a fuck about a lot of things, you know what I mean? And he displayed that in his lyrics, he wasn't faking about that.

(First verse vocals along with drums and bass: "Don't make me have to call your name out / Your crew is featherweight, my gunshots'll make you levitate / I'm only nineteen, but my mind is old / And when the things get for real, my warm heart turns cold / Another nigga deceased, another story gets told / It ain't nothin' really, ayo Dun, spark the Philly")

Havoc: The way he would portray his lyrics and his feelings about life, I knew it was directly attributed to his sickness that he was afflicted with from birth. I didn't think it was just something like to act tough on the record, I mean, he really was living that. Growing up the way we did, we had to grow up fast, you know, "only

19 but my mind is old,” that line is a testament to that. By 19, we already been through hell and back, you know what I mean? Things that, you know, the average teenager shouldn't go through, but it just makes you who you are. And you just accept it.

(Pitched down “Jessica” sample loop)

Havoc: Man, I owe a sense of gratitude. That song has given me the opportunity of a lifetime, single-handedly. I don't even think that I would be giving this interview without that song, to be honest with you.

(Pitched down “Jessica” sample loop along with drums)

Havoc: But it's bittersweet, right? Telling the story about “Shook Ones” or, you know, anything with Mobb Deep, it just feels incomplete, because I can't celebrate it with the person I created it with. It's a permanent sadness that I'll never shake, you know, he was there from its inception. It's not like friends that were close by, it's deeper than that.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Shook Ones, Pt. II,” by Mobb Deep, in its entirety.

(“Shook Ones, Pt. II” by MOBB DEEP)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Mobb Deep. You'll also find links to buy or stream this song. The 25th anniversary expanded edition of *The Infamous* also includes the original version of “Shook Ones,” “Shook Ones, Pt. I,” plus the instrumentals for both versions.

Song Exploder is made by me and producer Christian Koons, with production help from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Special thanks to Gabby Gibb, Will McKinney, Cody Schneiders, Kathleen Smith, Amit Runchal, and Chris Goodwin. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn more about all our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.