

Song Exploder
Phantogram - You Don't Get Me High Anymore
Episode 85

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.

("You Don't Get Me High Anymore" by PHANTOGRAM)

Hrishikesh: Sarah Barthel and Josh Carter started Phantogram in 2007. They've worked on crafting a particular sound, and they've had a particular way of making their dense productions since the beginning. But for their new record, three things changed. The song "You Don't Get Me High Anymore" took the band outside of their comfort zone. In this episode, Sarah and Josh break down how they made the original demo, and how outsiders like The-Dream and co-producer Ricky Reed influenced the way the song ultimately turned out.

("You Don't Get Me High Anymore" by PHANTOGRAM)

(Music ends)

Sarah: My name is Sarah Barthel.

Josh: My name is Josh Carter, and we play in the band Phantogram. The first idea for the song was the drum break that I found.

("Hook and Sling, Part One" by EDDIE BO)

Josh: It was Eddie Bo "Hook and Sling, Part One." I love sampling things, it's a big part of the Phantogram sound. I thought it was just real funky and I liked it.

("Hook and Sling, Part One" by EDDIE BO)

(Music ends)

Josh: The way that I chopped it almost sounded like there was like a crow kind of chirping, like on the one.

(Beat)

Sarah: And then, this too, this sound.

(Processed vocal sound)

Josh: It's like a bit of the Eddie Bo "Hook and Sling" and just pitch corrected it, because at the beginning of the song, he comes with like an, "Oh," and I just pitch corrected it, and added reverb, ran it through an amp.

(Processed vocal sound with beat)

(Music ends)

Sarah: I remember I loved the song, and I told you to name it. So you wrote "Dope Yo!" Exclamation point, parenthesis, "(According to Sarah)". He didn't love it at all. I mean, he thought it was funky.

Josh: I thought it was cool.

Sarah: But like the moment I heard it, I was like, "This is going to be a jam. Give it to me immediately." Josh gives me these beats that I don't let anyone else touch until I can figure them out. And that was one of them that I was really excited about.

(Processed vocal sound, bass, and beat)

(Bass)

Sarah: I am just a huge fan of dirty, gritty analog bass. You can really do a lot with a bass sound, a bass synth, especially. I always go for a specific gritty, grimy soft synth on my laptop.

(Bass ends)

Josh: When we're cooking up demos or just writing, we will ad-lib and sing gibberish over something, and just see how it flows, see if it sounds cool. And try to make sense out of the gibberish that we're singing.

Sarah: And normally when I write melodies along the lines of just like the gibberish, I'm alone and nobody's even in the house. No one's allowed to like even be able to hear me. It's a very emotional kind of state of mind that I go into. I can't even do it in front of Josh, but when we were in Atlanta visiting Tricky Stewart and

The-Dream. The-Dream, I mean, he's a master songwriter. Beyoncé "Put a Ring on It," and Rihanna "Umbrella," and he's a really cool artist. He was doing this cool thing. It was just like, "Okay, I'm doing kind of the same thing that we do. Yeah." There was a really cool vibe and energy there that I was definitely feeling.

(Vocals)

Sarah: It was the first time ever doing that in front of anybody else. It did just kind of come out of me.

(Vocals)

Sarah: We kept adding the layers. We've always added stacks on stacks of layers and layers and layers to give a heavy moment, or even just a song a heavier sound. And we were super excited about that.

(Vocals, guitar, and beat)

(Music ends)

Sarah: But then again, we were also, I think, covering up the charm of the beat. Why am I covering it up with so much bass and so many layers? And so, we wanted to subtract. We wanted to, I think, challenge ourselves in a way, because we always, that's just always how we did it.

(Synth bass)

Josh: He got into this tendency as part of our sound, always have this synth bass that almost never ends. You know, there's like never any space. It's always just going along to the music, which I find very cool sounding, but we're like, "Well, let's try to switch it up, and just let the song breathe a little bit more."

(Synth)

Josh: Like that's a cool vibe. We talk about songs in a very visual sense, and we were just kind of picturing this state of urgency in paranoia. Just this feeling of having to crawl out of your skin.

(Vocals: "Woke up stoned in the backseat / From a dream where my teeth fell out of my head")

Sarah: “Woke up stoned in the backseat from a dream where my teeth fell out of my head.” Josh always has dreams about his teeth falling out, and we always talk about it. Because it's supposed to mean you have anxiety, and you have all these issues [laughter]. And I had a dream about my teeth falling out during this time.

Josh: Even though you're dreaming and it's not waking life, does that necessarily mean that it's fiction?

(Vocals: “Nothing is fun / Not like before / You don't get me high anymore)

Sarah: In so many different aspects in your life, it's so easy to overdo it, you know? And when it's not doing it anymore, it's a very scary feeling. And that's why we wanted the song to be so heavy, and just scary in a way. I mean, it's a pretty scary sounding song. Desperate.

Josh: Desperate, yeah.

Sarah: There was that charm in the demo. For the vocals, I just spit it out. It was just like, [Sarah mimics vocals].

(Vocals)

Josh: And we didn't want to lose that. So as chopped up as the idea is in the lyrics, we wanted it to feel choppy too.

(Vocals: “My handshake, cellophane, landscape / Mannequin fakin' it the best I can”)

(Vocals with processed vocals: “Nothing is fun / Not like before / You don't get me high anymore / Used to take one / Now it takes four / You don't get me high anymore”)

Sarah: It was great for that element to come in to make it feel kind of unreal, unrealistic or inhuman. This is not in your mind.

Ricky: It was a little extra amount of haunting that I felt like we needed. My name is Ricky Reed. I co-wrote and produced “You Don't Get Me High Anymore.”

(Synth)

Josh: That was more Ricky's idea to use a synth that sounded like that.

Sarah: We would never have picked it.

Josh: And I struggled with that a lot internally, because I was like, *Is this, is this the right sound? Like, do I really want to use this?* And so, I had to sleep on it a lot. That was a big thing for me, honestly.

Ricky: You know, I knew in that section that we really, really needed to give the listener a moment. You know, a deep breath between the angsty break beat, and that buzzing bass and synth line. I knew we needed some space there. And I intentionally wanted to do something clean.

Josh: I felt like it could have been dirtier.

Ricky: That one was discussed, you know, management and label, and everyone weighing in, that was actually a very, very hotly debated thing. And I fought for it, personally, because I was like, "This is what makes the song unique."

(Synth, keyboard pad, and bass)

Ricky: One of the compromises that we made to give that sound a little bit more grit

(Horns join)

Ricky: was we ended up combining the horns, the keyboard pad and the bass, and ran them all into a tape machine. Let's crush all this in an old tape machine, and put it back into the system. So it almost had the sound of a sample as opposed to a purely clean sound.

Sarah: That's why we loved working with Ricky, because he showed a different light. It was very different.

(Synth)

Sarah: Because it's always just been the two of us, and we've been best friends since middle school, so it was very, very foreign.

Josh: We kind of like to be in the pilot seat, you know? And it's hard when you want that control. Between the two of us, I feel like we're kind of like psychic twins half the time.

Ricky: In one sense, you have to step into their world, and get comfortable with the form of communication that they've had since they've known each other. And try to anticipate what they will like, what they won't like, and really get inside the sound and the emotional heart of the band. At the same time, as a producer, it's also

(Synth ends)

Ricky: my job to challenge them, and to push them, and present them things that they might not be so comfortable with.

(Synth)

Sarah: This song took the longest amount of time to figure out for us.

Josh: For me, the hardest part was grappling with my own demo-itis. Like the original intent or idea of the song.

Sarah: We got stuck.

Josh: I'd call Sarah in the middle of the night, and be like, "Yo, are we, like should we just go back to the demo?" You know like, but we were aiming to make something special, and I've made peace with them [laughter].

Sarah: [laughter] For the time being.

Josh: Yeah.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "You Don't Get Me High Anymore," by Phantogram, in its entirety.

("You Don't Get Me High Anymore" by PHANTOGRAM)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/phantogram to learn more. You'll find a link to buy this song, and you can watch the music video. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. Follow Song Exploder on

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