

Song Exploder
Porter Robinson - Get Your Wish
Episode 207

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.

("Get Your Wish" by PORTER ROBINSON)

Hrishikesh: Porter Robinson is a Grammy-nominated electronic artist and DJ from North Carolina. In 2014, his first album hit #1 on Billboard's Dance chart, he was named MTVU's Artist of the Year, and one of the top DJs in the world - but then, he got stuck. He didn't release his second album for seven years, until April 2021. In this episode, he talks about what he was grappling with in those intervening years, and how all of that became part of his song "Get Your Wish."

Porter: My name is Porter Robinson.

(Music fades out)

Porter: I first started touring internationally at the ages of 18 and 19. I was just like a nerdy kid in high school and I had been making beats on the computer purely for fun with no expectation of success ever. But Friday afternoons, I would get out of school and I would go get on a plane, and I would do a show that Friday night. I'd do a show Saturday night and fly home Sunday. And people were writing about what I was doing, like the first whiffs of success that, you know, the adults are proud of you. I would be lying if I said it didn't shape my identity in some serious ways.

(Piano stem)

Porter: I really was addicted and I was really wrapped up in the kind of sense of self worth that I got from that. "Get Your Wish" was written around this time where I was basically saying like, I'm not sure that I want to be successful in music. I'm pretty sure that the attention that I've gotten so far has been bad for me. But I wanted to make music so badly.

(Piano stem ends)

Porter: It's a real place of comfort for me to just be touching an instrument because it's so much easier for me to toy around on the piano than it is for me to have a conversation with somebody. So just a ton of my time at home is spent sitting in front of the piano and it generates a lot of ideas in the end for me. I put on this metronome app on my phone.

(Metronome)

Porter: And I placed my phone down on my piano.

(Phone placed on piano)

Porter: And I just played this incredibly syncopated thing.

(Piano riff)

Porter: That was on the 15th of October 2018.

(Piano riff fades out)

Porter: The piano where I record almost all of my demos is my mom's childhood piano that she had growing up and it's the first piano I ever saw in my entire life. The way that I placed my phone down onto the piano, it created this

(Porter mimics a short percussive beat with his mouth)

(Sound of phone placed down on piano)

Porter: I have probably two thousand voice memos that begin almost identically of me putting my iPhone into this little slot on this piano, so like I hear a similar sound to that all the time. But that sound just sat perfectly over the metronome.

(Sound of phone placed down on piano looped over the metronome)

Porter: And it just kind of became the overall groove for the whole song.

(Sound of phone placed down on piano looped over the metronome along with the piano riff)

Porter: As I simplified the rhythm and simplified the chord progression into just the two chords, it felt like something that was gonna be a lot of fun to write to. You know, especially with this altered voice.

(Piano riff along with processed vocals stem: "I'll make it right again / 'But it's no use,' you said / As my hunger grows and grows")

Porter: I put on this pitch manipulation thing and once I gave it this like very sort of feminine, cute character, it really helped me, I felt like I could say anything. It felt like I was wearing a mask, you know, and I could really tell the truth about what I was feeling. Because it was too scary for me, I think, to sing openly with my real voice so putting on this mask of this voice processing effect, this was a step towards being able to be as open-hearted as I want to be.

(Processed vocals stem: "I'll make it right again / 'But it's no use,' you said / As my hunger grows and grows")

Porter: The first verse goes: "I'll make it right again, 'but it's no use,' you said, as my hunger grows and grows." It's like a desire for validation, or attention, or success. I think you can feel the shame that I feel around it in the way I'm talking about it.

(Piano stem)

Porter: The pre-chorus goes: "When the glory tries to tempt you, it may seem like what you need, but if glory makes you happy, why are you so broken up?"

(Piano stem along with processed vocals: "But if glory makes you happy, why are you so broken up?")

Porter: I knew from years of having been on tour and, you know, having played the big festivals and done these massive tours that I was still left feeling pretty unfulfilled and I was really sad. I realized external validation is a cup with a hole in the bottom and it can never be filled. And there's never enough, so in this song I'm asking, wait what is it that we're actually hoping is gonna happen here because clearly it's not gonna be that if I get to the next level of fame and success, that's gonna be the thing that fixes all these problems.

(Piano stem)

Porter: When it gets to the chorus, the image in my head is like somebody maybe screaming into a mirror. It's like somebody trying to fully reckon with themselves and like shake themselves awake, like what do you actually want.

(Processed vocals along with drum beat: "So tell me how it felt / When you walked on water / Did you get your wish? / Floating to the surface / Quicker than you sank / Idol, idol")

Porter: In this chorus, it's like if I scream this loud enough at myself, then I might come up with an answer.

(Piano stem)

Porter: The second verse of this song was a total struggle because I felt like if I didn't answer the question that was setup by the chorus, then the song was just a big nothing. Like why am I continuing to do this if I know that this ultimately won't fulfill me. And then I just started to think about like what my favorite music has done for me. I thought about Daft Punk and Bon Iver and I came to this answer that I'm making music for the other me's out there - people like me that rely on their favorite artists to get through a hard time. That allowed me to just suspend that question and just kind of allowed me to move forward.

(Piano stem along with processed vocals: "Don't say you lose just yet / Get up and move ahead / And not only for yourself / 'Cause that's your role / The work that stirred your soul / You can make for someone else")

Porter: Because I was no longer paralyzed by the question, did you get your wish? Did you get the thing that you wanted? Once I finally realized, the answer is no but that's okay, the world opened up.

(Chorus full track: "So tell me how it felt / When you walked on water / Did you get your wish? / Floating to the surface / Quicker than you sank / Idol, idol")

Porter: I got excited about the idea of using loops again after many, many years of feeling like that was taboo. And the first time I threw a swinging loop on there, it was one of those things where I was like -

(Porter gasps)

(Swinging loop along with drum beat)

Porter: As a music producer, when you first start, you're basically just arranging loops and then you come to a point where you feel like you've graduated from that and you sort of take pride in arranging your own rhythms and arranging your own samples. And I think that there's a third level where you realize that none of that stuff matters and you know at this point, you'll just use anything if it works.

(Swinging loop)

Porter: This loop is something that I guess, that's not really meant to be heard on its own, but when played in combination with the rest of the drums, it just adds something. It's a little bit of like - I found out within the last year or so that in perfuming, when people make perfumes, fragrances, things like that, it's not unheard of for them to add to 1% of the mix, a little bit of fecal odor. The idea is that it gives it more substance and it really can't be consciously registered. Now obviously, no one wants to be like buying poo-scented cologne. But when it's just subtly layered in there -

Hrishikesh: So you're saying these drums are your poo of the song?

(Porter laughs)

Porter: Yeah! Yes! This drum loop is the 90s like fecal odor of "Get Your Wish."

(Full drums track)

(Recording of a breeze and birds chirping)

Porter: That sound is a field recording. It's a meadow/forest sound. And to me, nature is kind of like this stand-in, it's this metaphor for health. Being mentally healthy and physically healthy and trying to find some sort of wellbeing.

(Field recording ends)

Porter: One of my absolute favorite sounds in the song is the piano solo, it's just like six or seven notes in the last chorus. It's this upright piano sound and it goes like

(Piano solo along with Porter humming the first few notes)

Porter: What I love about it is that in that section of the song, everything is pumping to the kick drum.

(Synth stem)

Porter: I just let that piano sit on top of all of that, not get pumped by the kick. It feels so human to me. I don't know. Just this little bit of expression that doesn't get pushed around by anything else. I just love that sound and something about the way that harmonizes with the vocal and sits on top of the rest of the track is like my favorite moment of that song.

(Piano solo along with the synth and processed vocals: "how it felt / When you walked on water / Did you get your wish? / Floating to the surface / Quicker than you sank / Idol, idol")

Porter: No one's heard me sing that song in my natural voice before and maybe I'm being down on myself, but I think my natural voice is pretty unremarkable. I'm not like a singer, singer. I'm not trying to win any singing competitions, but it's part of why I leaned on this high-pitch voice character so much because I felt like I really needed to sing and my normal voice timbre didn't really do it for me. But as I filled out the "Get Your Wish" chorus, it just felt a little better when there was a small little hint of my natural voice in there. Because part of the journey for me towards becoming as vulnerable and as honest and sincere as I hope to be is gonna be like being able to sing for real. To say the things that I wanna say sort of unmasked.

(Electronic strings stem)

Porter: My own desire for like attention and success and love from strangers feels like a monster that I manage. Who doesn't desire love, you know what I mean? Who doesn't feel good when somebody tells them that they did a good job? It's part of me, and it's not my favorite part of me and I fear it at times. So my story that I'm cured of wanting attention, that I'm cured of creative block, that's just not real life. But I think of trying to get closer to being the person who you wanna be, it's like, I see it as an upward spiral. As long as you're generally moving in the right direction, that's something you can feel proud of.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Get Your Wish," by Porter Robinson, in its entirety.

("Get Your Wish" by PORTER ROBINSON)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Get Your Wish," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm.

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