

Song Exploder
Sara Watkins - Without a Word
Episode 97

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.

("Without a Word" by SARA WATKINS)

Hrishikesh: Sara Watkins began her music career when she was only 8 years old, as one of the founding members of the Grammy award-winning band Nickel Creek. In 2016, she released her third solo album, *Young in All the Wrong Ways*. In this episode, Sara breaks down her song "Without a Word." The interview for this episode was recorded in front of a live audience at the Chicago Podcast Festival.

("Without a Word" by SARA WATKINS)

(Music fades)

Sara: This song started when I was on tour with my band mates. We were driving in England and I just remember sort of leaning against the passenger door and singing the basic melody. And I leaned over in my phone and just recorded.

(Vocals)

Sara: Lyrics started with this image of someone coming through the front door, and just wreaking all kinds of havoc in the living room; twirling around like a Tasmanian devil, and then out through the bedroom window, and just running out of the driveway, and down the street. And feeling the emotional equivalent of all that, that feeling of just, *what happened? To, how, everything was fine, and now there's disaster.*

(Guitar)

Sara: By the end of the tour, I had the first two verses.

(Guitar)

Sara: And I played it for my friend, Gabe Witcher, who produced the record. I asked him to help me finish it. I've known Gabe since I was 8. We grew up going to bluegrass festivals in Southern California. We lost touch with each other in the teenage years, but reconnected and just sent him a text out of the blue: "Hey, do you want to produce my record?" And he said, "Yes!" We have a similar appreciation for, really just caring about the band performance. And you get the right people together in a room, there's nothing like it. So we made this record by performing in the studio, live. For this album, I had a core band on all the songs and part of the fun was bringing these songs to life with this group of people for the first time.

(Drums)

Sara: Jay Bellerose, he is a drummer who I feel like, he somehow hitches a ride on my lungs and plays to the vocal.

(Vocals with acoustic guitar join: "When all clear lines blurred")

(Drums)

Sara: Jay's really good at playing with acoustic instruments, and this track is almost exclusively acoustic.

(Keyboard, guitar, and drums)

Sara: This beautiful dance between the keys and the guitar as they're sort of trading just sort of developed, and it became this beautiful theme in the song.

(Keyboard, guitar, and drums)

Sara: It's kind of a lovely dance of what's happening. Lyrically, these two characters, it's an instrumental treatment of what the lyrics are trying to sort through. The instincts of all these musicians were pretty right on. Benmont Tench on Wurlitzer and Chris Eldridge playing acoustic guitar.

(Keyboard, guitar, and drums)

(Violin)

Sara: In addition to that band, there's a string section.

(Violins)

Sara: I play fiddle but there's not a lot of fiddle on this record because it's a really strong character. But strings, they can be supportive and they can add to the harmonic complexity in a way that's not distracting, stylistically.

(Violins)

Sara: Gabe played all these beautiful violin parts and worthy arrangements for the bridge, which I think really helps it lift.

(Violins)

(Violins end)

Sara: My friend, Aoife O'Donovan, is singing the harmony on the bridge. And she was with me in the car when I was first starting to write this. The words came out really quickly. "First, the knock, and then a crash, and a staggering conviction that I might not catch up."

(Vocals with guitar: "First, the knock and then a crash / And a staggering conviction / That I might not catch up")

Sara: And she has this incredible ability to blend and go into these very strange melodies effortlessly.

(Vocals with guitar: "Like all the colors running down a portrait / And now it looks nothing like the one I fell in love with")

Sara: One of the things I loved about making this record is singing with the band. When I got in the studio with the other players helping me move the song along, it let me relax my singing. And then also having headphones in the studio, being able to hear when I sing quieter, I could hear myself, that brought it into this whole other kind of intimate moment.

(Vocals with guitar: "Where you are / Where you are / Where you are")

Sara: The last verse talks about wanting to just write somebody out of your story, but despite everything

(Guitar)

Sara: that they put you through, you still just want a little bit of inkling of their presence around your life.

(Vocals with guitar: "I thought I could write you, write down on a story / When all the clear lines blurred / I still want you to show up / Yeah hope you'll just roll through / After all these years without a word")

(Electric guitar with synth pad)

Sara: A lot of times writing songs is therapeutic, because it gives you the time and the space on the page to actually consider a lot of things

(Piano joins)

Sara: that you're going through, and try and organize them in a way that makes sense. Some people talk about a song just appearing to them and that's never happened to me. And it takes me a while to figure out what I'm trying to say. But it's the first time that I've had the feeling

(Organ joins)

Sara: that, that a song sort of uncovered itself to me without me being aware of it. And I found myself returning to this original image of the Tasmanian Devil spinning around in the living room and creating, you know, a mess of everything. That person in my life who just can't figure out what they want and you're tangled up.

(Electric guitar)

(Electric guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Without a Word," by Sara Watkins, in its entirety.

("Without a Word" by SARA WATKINS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this song, and to learn more about Sara Watkins.

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cutting-edge podcasts made possible by the Knight foundation and by MailChimp, learn more at radiotopia.fm. Next time on Song Exploder,

("Break Apart" by BONOBO ft. RHYE)

Sara: the song, "Break Apart," by Bonobo ft. Rhye. You can find song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Break Apart" by BONOBO ft. RHYE)

(Music fades)

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