

Song Exploder
Sharon Van Etten - Seventeen
Episode 156

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Seventeen" by SHARON VAN ETTEN)

Thao: This episode contains explicit language. Sharon Van Etten is a singer and songwriter who's put out five albums. She's also an actress - she's in *The OA* and *Twin Peaks*. Her most recent album, *Remind Me Tomorrow*, came out in January 2019. In this episode, Sharon breaks down a single from that album called "Seventeen." She shares the original demo she made with the song's co-writer Kate Davis, and we'll hear from producer John Congleton, who helped craft Sharon's new, more electronic sound. We've also got a new segment that we're introducing for the first time called This is Instrumental. So stick around after the full song to hear the conversation I had with Sharon about her current favorite instrument. But first, here is Sharon Van Etten on how she made the song "Seventeen."

("Seventeen" by SHARON VAN ETTEN)

Sharon: My name is Sharon Van Etten.

(Music fades out)

Sharon: When I started writing "Seventeen," I was spending more time in New York and exploring other sides of being a creative person. Meeting with other writers and trying to collaborate on songs together, which I've never done before because I'm a solo writer usually. I like to be by myself and make mistakes when no one's looking [laughter]. But as a writer you get stuck sometimes. And I felt like to challenge myself as an artist, I needed to work with other people to hear what they have to offer me because I wanted to learn. I was just introduced to this songwriter Kate Davis, and I liked her energy a lot. And we were about to be set up on like a blind date, which those writing sessions can sometimes feel like. I get nervous going into those sessions so I usually have a tool to help get things started if you don't really know somebody. And I had this idea for a song. It came from walking around New York and walking by a place that I used to know as one thing and it turned into something else. And then you start thinking about your time and where you're from and how things have changed. And I just kind

of spiraled into this idea. I sent her a very meandering version of a demo of this idea. And originally it was more of a country kind of dirge.

(Demo)

Sharon: I tracked all the instruments on the demo, very elementary style drums and guitar and bass. And I had the choruses kind of set, but I didn't really know what I wanted to say quite yet. So when she came, we kind of walked through the song and talked about what it meant to her and what it meant to me and finished writing the lyrics together. And then instead of me singing the song, I had her perform the song for me.

(Demo vocal: "Downtown hotspot used to be on this street / I used to be seventeen, I used to be seventeen")

Sharon: So she sang the whole demo. Because I know how I perform, I know my range, I know where I play it safe. And I wanted to see if there was something in there I didn't hear before.

(Demo ends)

Sharon: When I first started writing, it was more being bitter about the changes that I've seen, because I've been in New York for 15 years and seeing one of your favorite venues close or an old apartment being run down. Zebulon was a music venue in Williamsburg and the first place when I moved there that I hung out at regularly. And you knew that you were going to run into one of your friends there. It was like a community center for the neighborhood, you know. It was a really special spot, and it's a restaurant now, and that is just the New York story. But Kate was arriving to the song with fresh eyes, and being the younger version of me in a weird way. She is bright eyed, bushy-tailed, and excited about life. And she's newer to New York than I am and hasn't seen the kind of changes that I have seen. And she sang this one part with such intensity that it changed what the song meant to me at that point.

(Demo bridge: "I know what you're gonna be / I know that you're gonna be / You'll crumble it up just to see / Afraid that you'll be just like me")

Sharon: I had tears in my eyes when she sang that part because I felt we were really connecting on the song together, but with very different perspectives. The lyrics are: "I know what you're gonna be / I know that you're gonna be / You'll crumble

it up just to see / Afraid you'll be just like me." And she belted it for her life [laughter], you know. Like everything was at stake, it felt like. But she kind of did it with a smile on her face too, and that changed the way that I looked at those lines. You know, just an older sibling or your mother telling you all these things that you don't really believe yet.

(Demo ends)

Sharon: So the demo was done, and it is one of those songs that has risen through all the other demos as being the song that's going to make the record. But I got really into synthesizers, and in context of all the other songs that I started writing, I didn't know how it was going to fit in sonically. I got nervous the song wasn't going to make the record because it was this country kind of song. But John Congleton, the producer, still saw something really special in it.

John: What I really liked was the sentiment of the song. The idea like sort of talking to your former 17 year old self, and well it's just a really well-written song. I'm John Congleton, record producer guy person.

Sharon: Congleton and I had talked in the past, and his name was brought up to me to work on the last record, but I wanted to be pretty hands on in the production and I wasn't ready to let go of the songs. But I was in a moment in my life where I just wanted to make things as simple as possible and have somebody make the decisions for me. I had already written the songs and if I was going to record the record myself, then I would have made this record sound like my last record, which I'm proud of it, but I wanted to do something different.

John: We got coffee ourselves one morning and we talked a little bit about music and she described to me what she wanted the record to be.

Sharon: He asked me what I was looking for, and asked me what my influences were for this record. The references were Portishead,

("Wandering Star" by PORTISHEAD)

Sharon: Suicide,

("Ghost Rider" by SUICIDE)

Sharon: and Nick Cave.

("Jesus Alone" by NICK CAVE)

(Music fades)

Sharon: I wanted these songs to feel really strong and anthemic and powerful. All with a kind of underlying goth darkness. A lot of drones, a lot of bass, a lot of dark sounds. And when I told him, his eyes just lit up. I feel like that would scare most people, especially knowing my music. But he got excited, and I felt like he almost took it as like a challenge like a dare or something.

John: The version that I'd heard as a demo was a pretty fleshed out version.

(Demo)

John: But done in much more of an Americana style. Like a song that Sharon would have done in her early days, but she did not want anything on the record to be something that sounded like Americana, or something maybe that she had done in her past. I knew that the first thing to do would be to try to get it out of that feel. It was like a half-time kind of thing but I felt like it should have a double-time feel so I just told McKenzie who played drums on that song, and he started basically playing a solid, like bass drum pulse, just that "doo doo doo doo."

(Bass drum pulse)

John: And then he added the backbeat,

(Backbeat)

John: I pointed to him and I said "That's great!" And we just started recording.

(Drums)

John: And then I laid down a basic keyboard progression, just so people could see how the song was laid out.

(Drums end)

(Keyboard)

John: And then I put a bunch of drones and atmospheres.

(Drones along with atmospheres)

John: Basically, so when the band would play, they would be informed by this sort of like menacing, sinister vibe that Sharon had sort of described she wanted.

(Drones along with atmospheres)

Sharon: I love all the wild, I mean, I don't know what to call them, but like all the squeals.

(Squeal-like noises along with drones and atmospheres)

Sharon: Like it just feels like fireworks in a wild way, musical fireworks.

John: That is something I made with a guitar and a bunch of pitch pedals. Totally just messing around and I just grabbed a couple phrases that I liked, and just threw it in the song in random places.

(Squeal-like noises along with drones and atmospheres)

Sharon: When I was getting notes back from the mixes, I remember someone said, "Can you turn the velociraptor down a little bit [laughter]?" I don't think I turned it down though [laughter].

(Squeal-like noises along with drones and atmospheres end)

(Piano)

John: The piano was recorded as sort of a harmonic guide for the band, and it was something that we maybe weren't even sure if we were going to use, but there's a funny thing that happens whenever you have sort of all this alien texture surrounding something that's very sort of pedestrian and almost sort of working class. It gives like a lot of gravitas to both sounds.

(Piano along with squeal-like noises, drones and atmospheres)

Sharon: One of my favorite things about the process for this record was that I didn't want to bring my musicians in for a change. I had a great time making my last record, *Are We There*. But emotionally having all your friends involved and wanting to

have your ideas heard, but then also the balancing of letting the musicians express themselves too. You're kind of walking a line when you're working with friends, it's intense. So he brought in all the musicians, and I walk in, and they're already playing the song. And they're just running it through, and it sounds amazing.

(Full instrumental)

John: The vibe at that point was like, "I'm going to work with the band and get this thing sort of percolating so all she has to do is come in and react."

Sharon: It was pretty mind-blowing, I know that I could have at any moment said, "I don't like this" or "let's try this," but there was never a moment where I had to say that.

John: She trusted me so much, which as a producer is such a gift.

(Drums)

John: So there's a live performance of the drums and the cymbals really come in at very specific moments.

(Cymbal hit along with drum beat)

John: In rock music to me, a lot of times, cymbals are like curse words, and if you use curse words all the time, people just ignore you. But if you never curse, and out of nowhere you scream, "Fuck," I assure you everyone will notice that you've done something, and to me that's the same way I like to think about cymbals. And halfway through the song there's like a breakdown where the backbeat kind of goes away.

(Bass drum)

John: And then there's a second drum kit that comes in that's an overdub.

(Second drum kit along with bass drum)

John: That was done by Brian Reitzell. He's hitting like a big concert bass drum and doing like these sort of extra rhythms on cymbals, so it kind of gives it this more frenetic, energetic, anxious feeling, coming out of that section.

(Drums end)

Sharon: My touring singer, Heather Woods Broderick, she sings on the whole record.

(Heather's vocals: "Downtown hotspot halfway up the street / I used to be free, I used to be seventeen")

Sharon: She has a really good ear and sometimes when we're singing together, we get lost because our voices compliment each other so well that we don't know who's singing which part.

(Harmonized vocals: "Follow my shadow around your corner")

Sharon: We could do 4 or 5 harmonies if we really wanted to on a track and make it sound like a wall of voices. But I tried not to do that on this record because I've done it so much in the past. Because I feel like even when you try to enhance it with harmonies, sometimes they do get buried and lost, and I wanted to be heard. I started the song just almost like I was talking to somebody. Because I kind of always imagine another person on the other side of that mic that I'm singing it to.

(Vocals along with piano: "I know what you wanna say / I think that you're all the same")

Sharon: And then as the song built, I could feel myself getting more into it.

(Vocals along with piano: "Downtown hotspot used to be on this street / I used to be seventeen, I used to be seventeen")

Sharon: I just remember him telling me to just keep singing it harder. He's like, "This is a rock song, you know, like you should belt it." [Laughter] And I'm not used to rocking out that hard [laughter], but it was really, really fun to channel kind of this Bruce Springsteen energy that I am a big fan but I've never gotten to express in front of people before [laughter]. As a performer singing songs like that, it's even more cathartic than I could have imagined.

John: Sharon has this very like evocative moment where she kind of goes sort of tuneless and starts screaming.

Sharon: By the time we get to that part, we wanted it to feel like an explosion and to hear the agony of knowing something that somebody else doesn't.

(Vocals along with piano and some distortion: "I know what you're gonna be / I know that you're gonna be / You'll crumble it up just to see / Afraid that you'll be just like me")

(Music ends)

Thao: And in that explosive moment, who were you picturing you were singing to?

Sharon: Me. Like young me in New York that thought I knew everything. But I also envision my mom just singing that to me too, you know. The more that I lived with it and worked on it, it felt like a multi kind of generational song. I wish that I had listened to her when she would give me advice or say that I could be open with her. And I just, I was so closed off and I did not accept like her help or guidance, and I thought I knew better.

(Piano along with drones and atmospheres)

Sharon: For some reason, whenever a parent gives you advice or says that they know or they understand, like as a kid you just don't believe them, that they ever were a human being, you know. The older I get, and now especially I have a son, I'm more and more like my mother than I ever realized. You know, I think as you get older and you have more and more hindsight, hopefully, you can forgive who you were, you can forgive yourself. You can have more of an understanding of where you were coming from and also where your parents were coming from. It's definitely a message to her, to myself. It's an apology, but it's also forgiveness. You know, I feel like it's giving me a little bit of closure on my past and acknowledging the weaknesses but also embracing them.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "Seventeen," by Sharon Van Etten, in its entirety.

("Seventeen" by SHARON VAN ETTEN)

Thao: Coming up, more from Sharon Van Etten for our new segment called, This is Instrumental.

We're trying something new on Song Exploder, a bonus segment outside of the creation of a song. We want to find out about the tools that influence artists and shape how they work and make music. Here is more with Sharon Van Etten.

Thao: What's your current favorite instrument?

Sharon: Well, when I first started writing a lot of these songs, it was the Jupiter-4.

(Roland Jupiter-4)

Sharon: It's a keyboard, a synthesizer from the 80s. It's really fun, you can get lost in it for a really long time [laughter]. I don't own one but I shared a studio with Michael Cera, randomly, and one day, I showed up and there was a synthesizer in there, and he sent me a message that he had gotten it, and he's like, "Feel free to mess around with it." So I would play it all the time because he would play my piano, and my drums, and we would just share each other's instruments. I plugged it into my guitar pedal setup, like I would plug in my guitar and I just messed around on it and I don't normally do that with other people's things [laughter], but it's kind of nice to not have anybody watch you experiment as you're learning what an instrument sounds like so that, you know, there's no preconceived notion about what it's supposed to sound like or how you're supposed to play it. And, you know, I don't have that kind of courage to go into a music store and jam like that, I never did [laughter]. So it was nice to have an instrument like that to test out. I ended up writing a lot on it. I play a little bit of piano so like I know how to play basic chords. But you can sustain on the synthesizer, and you can hold a lot of the notes so that it frees you up when you're working on vocals, and makes me sing in a different way. You know, I'm realizing that I have an interest in synthesizers, and I want to build up my collection now. Jupiter's are actually kind of hard to come by as I've been trying to find one, they're not cheap [laughter]. So I'm still on the hunt to find Jupiter, but I'm also about to move so I'm going to wait until I settle in. I'll have a studio in Los Angeles, and I can actually spread out there, which will be really fun.

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Sharon Van Etten, John Congleton and Kate Davis. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song, "Seventeen." Next time on Song Exploder, Panda Bear.

("Dolphin" by PANDA BEAR)

Song Exploder was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Special thanks to Damiano Marchetti and Gimlet Media for taping our interview with Sharon. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website or on our Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

("Dolphin" by PANDA BEAR)

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