

**Song Exploder**  
**Soccer Mommy - Circle the Drain**  
**Episode 179**

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.

*("Circle the Drain" by SOCCER MOMMY)*

Hrishikesh: Sophie Allison makes music under the name Soccer Mommy. Her debut album came out in 2018, when she was 20 years old, and the *New York Times* named it one of the best albums of the year. This week her second album comes out, and it includes this song, "Circle the Drain." I spoke to Sophie, while she was in her hometown of Nashville, and in this episode, she takes "Circle the Drain" apart and explains how it was influenced by songs from her childhood.

*("Circle the Drain" by SOCCER MOMMY)*

Sophie: I'm Sophie from Soccer Mommy.

*(Music fades out)*

Sophie: When I started writing "Circle the Drain," I was in the van [laughter], actually, on a West Coast tour. And I was in the backseat, playing my guitar. And the van, it's kind of the only time I had to, you know, sit and play guitar somewhere that people weren't going to be listening to me. I like that, and the fact that there's noise, like white noise, that makes it kind of hard to hear me in the back. You know, it's the same as getting privacy at home. And that's kind of some of the only downtime you find on tour. So it's the perfect time to try to write. Whenever I write songs, the first thing I always come up with is the guitar stuff. With "Circle the Drain," it was the chord progression.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Sophie: As soon as I got these chords, a whole vibe of a song came into my head. When I was writing "Circle the Drain," I was feeling pretty low honestly. Even though I was, like everything in my life was going great. Like I was doing the job I want to do. I had love in my life, I had friends, but I was still feeling really low. And you know it just kind of started coming out of me. I had this like idea in my head for the melody. The chorus came first.

*(Chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Hey, I've been falling apart these days / Split open, watching my heart go / 'Round and around, 'round and around / Circle the drain, I'm going down")*

Sophie: Usually when I write music, I've given reasons for sadness. You know, I've like been going through a breakup or I've been hurt by someone or something like that. I feel like there's usually a reason. But there was like really nothing going wrong in my life besides internally, you know, there's not even anything really emotional that had happened to me that I was hurting over. It's just like useless sadness, I guess. You know, it starts to make you feel like, "Oh my God, how many more times can I do this? I'm like losing it a little bit right now. Like I don't know how many times I can pick myself back up." But you have to find some way to get it out and I think music is another way to talk about it.

*(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I wanna be calm like the soft / Summer rain on your back / Like the fall of your shoulders / But everything just brings me back down / To the cold hard ground / And it keeps getting colder")*

Sophie: The first and second verses are kind of about these things I want for myself, for my own calmness and sanity a little bit. And then the second and third verse, those ones kind of came within the week, because, you know, we were traveling every day, so I was just kind of working more on the song.

*(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "It's a feeling that boils in my brain / I would dial back the flame / But I'm not sure I'm able")*

Sophie: The chorus and the verse have some different chords in them, but they start on the same chord.

*(Guitar chord)*

Sophie: And I kind of hate in a song where there's no change. I wanna like deviate from it in some kind of pre-chorus that changes the mood for a second. So I threw in those chords.

*(Pre-chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Things feel that low sometimes / Even when everything is fine")*

Sophie: I first recorded the demo in my sister's room of my parents' house on my four track. Most of my gear was there and I had just moved out of their house six months before. So, I had to go over there to get the stuff and I just started recording basically, as soon as I got there.

*(Demo first verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I wanna be calm like the soft / Summer rain on your back / Like the fall of your shoulders")*

*(Demo acoustic guitar)*

Sophie: Once I recorded the demo, I was like, "This could be great. If I do it right, this could be really awesome." It just feels like I felt when I was a little kid and I was hearing stuff like "Torn" or like "Soak Up the Sun" or anything like that.

Hrishikesh: "Torn," by Natalie Imbruglia, came out in 1997, the year Sophie was born. And "Soak Up the Sun," by Sheryl Crow, came out when she was five.

Sophie: It hits you in the heart in that kind of way and it also makes you wanna laugh and like sing along to it, I guess. It's this weird mixture of like really sad and it's also like just makes you wanna scream it a little bit. When I wrote the song, I really felt like it was the perfect opportunity to do all these things that I loved about 2000's pop music. That's when I fell in love with music, and it just feels like, you know, a time when I wasn't stressed out about everything and was just kind of excited about music and just wanted to sing along to stuff. And I've never wanted to stop, it's always been a driving passion for me. So I had so many ideas for production for making it sound just like this summery, watery, poppy like 2000's song that it was born to be in my heart.

*(Demo acoustic guitar ends)*

Sophie: Gabe Wax is a producer that I met when I was still in college, I felt like he just understood everything I wanted to do so well. And so yeah, when it came time to do the second album, I wanted to do it with Gabe. My band, when I recorded, we had been playing together for like a year and touring a ton. So the band is a big part of it. Most of the days, at the beginning, were us kind of learning the songs. Everyone had heard the demos and kinda listened to them, but they needed full arrangements. So the way we started in the studio was we just started getting live takes of everything down, it was Ryan Elwell on drums.

*(Drums)*

Sophie: Graham Gets on bass.

*(Bass)*

Sophie: Julian Powell on guitar.

*(Guitar)*

Sophie: Me.

*(Guitar lead)*

Sophie: And Rodrigo Avendano playing keys.

*(Synths)*

Sophie: When it comes to everybody's parts, I like to let people make their own parts because I think that that makes it so much more fun and interesting and it makes everybody happier.

*(Entire band together)*

Sophie: That was kind of what the whole first week or two was about, we were all like this has got that early 2000's like Sheryl Crow energy and we've got to channel it. And Gabe will keep pushing us until we get something that feels amazing.

*(Music ends)*

Sophie: We just wanted it to shimmer.

*(Lead guitar along with acoustic guitar)*

Sophie: I actually came up with the lead guitar lines in the van, around the time I wrote the song.

*(Lead guitar)*

Sophie: It's such a huge part that it really needs to poke out and Gabe came up with the idea of doubling it with baritone to make it feel more present.

*(Doubled lead guitar)*

*(Drum machine)*

Sophie: I had the idea for drum machines before we got in the studio and I really wanted that kind of like beeping and like a booping kind of drum machine.

*(Drum machine)*

Sophie: But it wasn't enough. We needed something making it hit a little harder.

*(More drum elements added)*

Sophie: All of those like early 2000's songs, a lot of them have some drum machine that's mixed really low in with the drums. So it just makes the drums really smack.

*(Drums along with drum machine)*

*(Drums along with drum machine end)*

*(Guitar drones)*

Sophie: That is all Julian on guitar. I don't know if you've ever heard of this guitar pedal made by Hologram, the Infinite Jets. But it can kind of allow you to make these amazing drones and synths with your guitar that just can be so beautiful. We literally just gave him a couple turns sitting in the tracking room with an amp and some pedals and just kind of making these long tonal drones that would just add some like beauty into the song. I think he definitely got that kind of like light filtering through water kind of imagery in the tone. I just wanted it to have this really like water themed vibe, you know, to match the "Circle the Drain" part.

*(Bubbles)*

Sophie: I was trying be like, "How can I make this sound like you're in like a bathtub or something?" I literally just found like some bubble sounds and I had my phone plugged up to the Pro Tools and I would just play these bubbles sounds like random parts to kind of like build it, and I love them.

*(Bubbles)*

Sophie: Oh my gosh, they add so much like, “Oh wow, she really is trying to make it sound like we're like underwater.” You know, it passes the subtle parts and takes it along into screaming it in your face. And then I had the idea of it dropping down to nothing for a moment.

*(Full instrumental lowers in volume)*

Sophie: And Gabe wanted to like make it sound like you're like starting a tape on a cassette player,

*(Sound of cassette player starting a tape)*

Sophie: which I love. So it's kind of building back in from this broken down thing. And it gives you that like double satisfaction of like, “Oh, stuff's starting to build in. Now, we're kind of in.” And then this like even bigger explosion.

*(Full track blossoms back up to normal volume)*

*(Processed backing vocals)*

Sophie: I put those backing vocals through like a big phaser because I was like, I want it to have this weird swirling sound to it. Like I want it to sound like it's everywhere, but you know, you can't catch it in this weird way. I love those kind of moments where you know you can hear it, but it's also like so subtle that it feels like a secret or something. It kind of feels like the devil is speaking to you through a song or something. Except it's about you being depressed.

*(Chorus vocals: “Split open, watching my heart go / ‘Round and around, ‘round and around / Circle the drain, I’m going down”)*

Sophie: That feeling when you're alone and just like wallowing and can't really like help yourself, it just feels like damp and dark and it just feels like musty.

*(Second verse vocals along with guitar drones and synth: “And I think there’s a mold in my brain / Spreading down all the way / Through my heart and my body”)*

Sophie: And then I wanted to kind of bring in another issue, where it's like, I wanna be stronger for everyone that's around me that I care about and that has to watch me go through this.

*(Second verse vocals along with guitar drones: "I'm trying to seem strong for my love / For my family and friends / But I'm so tired of faking")*

*(Guitar drones)*

Sophie: I think that's a huge part of what, you know, it's about, is that you're in this like kind of insufferable sadness that you don't want to plague other people with. And a lot of other people are dealing with it, like it's the same thing. But it's like this weird thing where kind of no one can help save each other. It's a very solitary experience and journey, to get onto the other side of that.

*(Guitar drones)*

Sophie: When I wrote the song, I was in it. But I was getting out. And

*(Guitar drones along with backing vocals)*

Sophie: part of what was helping me out of it was the inspiration to write. Being inspired by something is really helpful. Like I'm just like taking a deep breath, and just kind of letting it out. It just feels like, like peace.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Circle the Drain," by Soccer Mommy, in its entirety.

*("Circle the Drain" by SOCCER MOMMY)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Soccer Mommy. You'll also find the link to stream or buy this song, "Circle the Drain."

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