

Song Exploder
Toro y Moi - Half Dome
Episode 35

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.

("Half Dome" by TORO Y MOI)

Hrishikesh: Over the past five years, Chaz Bundick, aka Toro y Moi, has made music that's spanned a range of genres and styles. On his newest album, *What for?*, he's shifted styles again.

Coming up, Chaz explains why. He'll break down the song "Half Dome," named after the hiking destination in Yosemite National Park. Here's Toro y Moi from an interview recorded live at the Noise Pop Festival in San Francisco.

("Half Dome" by TORO Y MOI)

(Applause)

Chaz: Hello, my name is Chaz Bundick.

(Applause fades)

Chaz: My wife asked me if I want to do "Half Dome." I was like, "Sure." You know, moving out to California, I've only been here for like, three and a half years. The nature is just crazy out in California, compared to South Carolina, so I've been really like getting back into nature, and trying to really see as many different, crazy, natural things as possible. I thought about it on the hike, I could probably write about this because I'm really scared right now [laughter].

(Audience laughter)

Chaz: This song was written on guitar first.

(Acoustic guitar)

Chaz: I wanted the progression to have a lot of chords, but not be really connected to jazz or funk. I knew that I just didn't want to get locked into that R&B thing

again, so mainly because I had trouble trying to write like other types of lyrics within that genre of, like, R&B and sort of more soulful progressions. I figured guitar-based music was a good solution.

(Acoustic guitar)

(Acoustic guitar ends)

Chaz: I figured, like, might as well just go for rock so I can try to get some other lyric ideas out, going to go see a show.

(Vocals: "Friday night we go watch music")

Chaz: Or going to go hike Half Dome.

(Vocals: "Saturday we do Half Dome")

Chaz: For this song, I wrote the guitar and the vocals at the same time.

(Vocals with acoustic guitar: "That wasn't all too bad / Oh well, I'll sleep tomorrow")

Chaz: I had this thing written on my blackboard and it just said like, "What do you do? How does that make you feel?" And I'd like, just look at it whenever I'm writing my lyrics. It was just like a moment in time, really, just talking about what I did on Friday, and what I'm going to do on Saturday, and then, after I did that thing on Saturday, this is how I feel [laughter].

(Audience laughter)

Chaz: My guru sound guy, he built me this bass. I got this bass for like 20 bucks at Goodwill in South Carolina. It's all in pieces. I just gave it to him, and he fixed it for like another 20 bucks. And just like put this built-in overdrive in it.

It sounds crazy, sounds like a synth.

(Bass)

Chaz: The bass is doing like this weird chromatic shift down. So I was like, "What kind of chords go on top of that scale down?" My friend, Harry, he was like, "You

should do one of those octave things.” I was like, “What are you talking about?”
He's like, “You know, like Jackson 5, like [mimics electric guitar],

(Electric guitar joins)

Chaz: and I was like, “Okay [laughter], I'll try it.”

(Electric guitar with bass)

Chaz: That was a blatant Jackson 5 reference.

(Drums)

Chaz: So I had this loop that I played on the drums, and I just like looped it a bunch. I had my drummer, Andy, replay it live. I've never worked with outside drummers. It was cool because I could sort of just like direct him, and he's a real drummer, so he could just do it so smooth. He was like throwing these fills,

(Drum fill)

Chaz: and then I got these ideas to just sort of cut the bass out or cut the whole band out, and just have the drum fill.

(Drum fill)

Chaz: Thought that was very cool.

(Mellotron)

Chaz: That keyboard sound is, it's a Mellotron going through a LFO sort of modulator. The LFO, for people who don't know, it's just the low frequency oscillator, just makes the pitch pretty much go like this.

(Mellotron)

Chaz: So I just had to go on like fast, and then I just slowed it down.

(Mellotron fades)

Chaz: The song was pretty much done. I just really wanted to have like another element there to take it to another level. But I thought it'd be cool to just have a friend on it. Ruban Nielson from Unknown Mortal Orchestra is playing the lead guitar. His guitar tone is like, signature sound. It fit really well.

(Electric guitar)

Chaz: And yeah, and like reverse the guitar intro, and put it in between verses.

(Reversed guitar)

Chaz: I thought it was like a nice little reference to, you know, psychedelia. I knew that I wanted him on the record just because he shreds on guitar. I was like, "Man, that would be so nice, because I can't shred on guitar."

(Electric guitar)

Chaz: And he's doing backup vocals. I had him do a falsetto, and he was really kind of shy about it. I was like, "Just, just do it."

(Vocals: "Ahhh / You must be waiting / You must be waiting / You must be waiting / Ahhh / You must be waiting / You must be waiting / You must be waiting")

Hrishikesh: And these backing vocals, sounds like you say, "No-one"?

(Vocals: "Look at who you are beside, no-one")

Hrishikesh: But it only happens in that one vocal, and if I play the rest of the song, you can't even hear it.

Chaz: Right.

(Electric guitar)

Chaz: Yeah, that was intentional. You just throw it in there, just because it's fun. You know, The Beatles would do that. It's just like throwing like random stuff. It's like an audible, and it's for purposes like this, it's like, "Yeah, I found this. What is this?"

(Audience laughs)

Chaz: Thank you.

(Audience applauds)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Half Dome," by Toro y Moi, in its entirety.

("Half Dome" by TORO Y MOI)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to buy this song, and to learn more about Toro y Moi. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.