

Song Exploder
Willow - Transparent Soul ft. Travis Barker
Episode 220

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("Transparent Soul" by WILLOW ft. TRAVIS BARKER)

Hrishikesh: Willow Smith is a singer and songwriter from Los Angeles. She's also a member of one of the most famous families in the world. From a very young age, she followed in the musical footsteps of her parents, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett-Smith, and released her first single when she was just ten years old. Since then, she's released four albums, and was named one of TIME Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. On her most recent album, she put out this song, "Transparent Soul." It was co-written with her longtime collaborator Tyler Cole, and it features Travis Barker from Blink-182 on drums. I talked to Willow about how her upbringing and her musical evolution from her early pop star days influenced the way she made this song.

("Transparent Soul" by WILLOW ft. TRAVIS BARKER)

(Music ends)

Willow: I don't have any friends [laughter]. I mean, I have, I have like two or three friends.

(Synth pad)

Willow: When I was younger, I was very confused as to why people would act the way they would act. They would act different around me, than they would act around other people, or just seeing the differences in how I was treated because of who my parents were. A lot of people will just use you for what they want to use you for, and that's just not okay.

(Synth pad ends)

Willow: My name is Willow Smith. Me and my family have always kind of wanted to know what the meaning of life is. So, for a very long time, we've tried to connect

ourselves with monks and scholars and intellectuals who have dedicated their life in the search of what the meaning of life is. And so, I was reading a book called *The Journey Home* by Radhanath Swami. And in that book, there's a quote that says, "A saintly person is so pure that when you come in contact with them, they act as a spotless mirror, and they reflect back to you, your inner beauty and your inner ugliness." And I just thought that that was so beautiful. I just thought that that was such a perfect way of describing purity. But right now, that's really not where I'm at [laughter], but I want to, but I want to be able to do that. So I wanted to take that idea, and put it in like a grungy, angsty world, where I don't have all the answers.

(Guitar)

Willow: When I'm making a song, I start with guitar. My mom was in a metal band, from the time I was like 5 to the time I was like 10. And it was just, just in me. Throughout my whole life, I had always felt like I wanted to do rock but I didn't really know what my place was.

(Guitar fades)

Willow: You know, in my pop star days, there was [laughter], there was a lot of just very traditional pop training. Learned it, learned it, learned it, learned it, then was like, I hate it. Completely threw all of that away, I'm going to do something else. Did that for a couple years, learned a lot from that, learned a lot about my voice, learned a lot about what comes naturally. And then, now I'm kind of in this middle ground of like, okay, I'm going to take my years of not caring and just doing whatever, and my years of intense, intense training, and I'm going to try to mesh those two things.

(Guitar)

Willow: So, it was really just an awakening of how I could do music. And during that time was actually the time I met Tyler.

(Bass joins)

(Guitar fades)

Willow: Tyler's playing bass on "Transparent Soul." He is my best friend and co-producer. I think we started making music together, like a year and a half into

knowing each other. I don't really make music with a lot of people because I'm like kind of shy and insecure sometimes [laughter]. So, it took some warming up to each other, and then we actually didn't start really making music with each other until 4 or 5 years into knowing each other. So our musical synergy grew over time, and I feel like we've just become really great musical partners.

(Guitar with bass)

(Bass fades)

Willow: For this song, I wanted to give it that atmospheric feeling that sometimes rock doesn't really have, or specifically pop-punk doesn't really have. I wanted to give it a spacey, counter-rhythmic feeling, with those [sings guitar melody].

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Willow: And then, that higher tone with those bendy notes.

(Guitar)

Willow: There were a lot of melodies, guitar melodies, and all of these guitars coming in and out would be a little confusing if they were all in the same tone, so each guitar needed to have its own world. And I feel like they all kind of gel really nicely together.

(Guitars with bass)

(Music ends)

Willow: So we went crazy with the guitars, and then we were like, "Okay, now let's move on to the vocals."

(Vocals: "I don't fuckin' know if it's a lie or it's a fact / All your little fake friends will sell your secrets for some cash / Smile in my face, then put your cig out on my back / If you ever see me, just get to runnin' like The Flash")

Willow: So that first line, "I don't fucking know if it's a lie or it's a fact," was kind of born from being angry and sad and confused that you don't know what someone's

intentions are. Thank God, I was never in a situation where one of my friends ever sold pictures to TMZ, but definitely being betrayed, like people telling my business to people who shouldn't be knowing, or just taking advantage of you because you have resources. That's not something that friends do. So that was always something happening in my life. So, because of that fear of being taken advantage of, and because of being taken advantage of so many times, I kind of had to close myself off and

(Bass)

Willow: still kind of close myself off because that's scary. You don't want to get hurt, you don't want to put yourself in a position where people can take advantage of you.

(Vocals with bass: "I knew a boy just like you / He's a snake, just like you / Such a fake, just like you, but I can see the truth / Transparent soul / I can see right through, just so you know")

Willow: While I was reading that book, we were in the studio, and we're creating this track, and I just kind of got inspired, and I kind of just had this, "Aha," of like, "Transparent Soul." Like, "Yes!" In reality I know that, I want to get to this state where I can be this "transparent soul," and I can see through you in a compassionate way. But I couldn't say, "I'm trying to be a transparent soul," it had to be "transparent soul."

(Vocals, guitars, and bass: "Transparent soul / I can see right through, just so you know")

Willow: The verses took a little bit of time because I was really trying to craft what I really wanted to say. Because most times in my music, it's just very abstract. But for this song, I felt it was really important to pinpoint those lyrics in a very specific way.

(Vocals: "No one's brave enough to take the fall right / But it's all your fault, why you actin' like it's alright?")

Willow: Nobody likes to be wrong. But we need to actually be like, "OK, I messed up. This is what I did. Let me try and make up for it in some way. Let me try and give more love to this situation than I had in the past."

(Vocals: "I knew a girl just like you / She was vain, just like you / Such a pain, just like you and everybody knows the truth")

(Drums)

Willow: Travis Barker is a pop-punk god, and the drummer of Blink-182.

(Drums)

Willow: I see him as being a historical figure in the rock world. And I sent him the song, and he was like, “Yo, I want to come down to the studio and actually track it with you.” I was shitting my pants because I was like the fact that Travis is playing on my song right now is just insane. And also, what was really surprising was that he just listened to it once and went in and did the whole song, damn near perfectly the first time.

(Drums)

(Vocals join: “I don’t fuckin’ know if it’s a lie or it’s a fact / All your little fake friends will sell your secrets for some cash / Smile in my face, then put your cig out on my back / If you ever see me, just get to runnin’ like The Flash”)

Willow: That energy that he brings to the drums, just put it, just a little bit more on that pop-punk vibe.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: “Transparent soul / I can see right through, just so you know”)

Willow: That was like exactly what I needed to strike the balance I was trying to create.

(Music ends)

Willow: And then, the bridge comes in.

(Vocals: “It’s clear to me now / You’re scared of me, wow”)

Willow: I told Tyler, I was like, “OK, I just want to bring it into trippy land. Really, really quick. I want to give people sweeping harmonies,” and I think we did a really good job with that.

(Vocals: “Ooooh / It’s clear to me now / You’re scared of me, wow / It’s clear to me now / Transparent soul”)

Willow: People are always searching for something, and in their striving, they're running away from themselves. Because they're trying to get these things and these experiences and, you know, whatever it is to feel fulfilled.

Hrishikesh: But it feels to me like there's some kind of search for empathy on your part.

Willow: Yeah, because it's clear to me now why you're doing this. And even if someone does the most terrible thing, you have to try to find that place of compassion and that place of self-love that can then help you move through that situation, and deal with that person in the most compassionate and efficient way possible.

(Vocals)

Willow: My goal is to always just go a little bit further down that path of self-exploration, just a little bit further down that path of understanding the absolute truth of all things. Obviously, that sounds absolutely batshit, but that's what I believe [laughter], and that's what, where my intention is every time I step into the studio.

(Synth pad with guitar)

Willow: You definitely don't want to marinate in your jealousy and your ego. And so, I think that this song was a really great way for me to purge those emotions. I'm trying to get there, you know, I'm still angry, I'm not 100% there, I still have a lot of work to do. But I'm searching and reaching

(Music ends)

Willow: for that reality.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Transparent Soul," by Willow, in its entirety.

("Transparent Soul" by WILLOW ft. TRAVIS BARKER)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net/willow, where you'll find links to buy or stream "Transparent Soul," and you can watch the music video. This episode was made by me, with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. 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. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

© 2020 Translucence