

Song Exploder
mxmtoon – Mona Lisa
Episode 236

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.

("Mona Lisa" by MXMTOON)

Hrishikesh: Maia from mxmtoon released her first EP in 2018. She was 18-years-old and recorded it in her bedroom and self-released it. It went on to be streamed over 100 million times. This year, she put out her second album, *Rising*. And in this episode, she breaks down her song "Mona Lisa." She told me about how different it is from the songs she used to write when she was teenager. And how she found something authentic and honest by connecting with a part of herself from even earlier in her life.

("Mona Lisa" by MXMTOON)

(Music ends)

Maia: I'm mxmtoon, but my name is actually Maia.

In the past, it's been easier for me to kind of play this part of being mxmtoon rather than actually thinking about who I am as Maia. A lot of my work has really been about, kind of, hiding in the background and not really sharing my experience and story proudly. And I don't think I was making music that felt representative of the type of songs that I really love to listen to in my free time.

And with this song specifically, I think it was this really important quest to figure out how I could make something that felt empowering without trying to hide myself. And so it was a challenge that I had posed for myself to make something that felt like a pop song that could be about celebrating myself.

(Synths)

(Synths end)

When we were in quarantine, I found myself going back to a lot of the music that I loved to listen to growing up, and it's cheesy, but I had *Mama Mia* on a CD that I would listen to constantly. And I had *Hairspray* on CD – I was a big musical kid,

I guess, growing up – and I listened to all of these things, and I just remembered the joy that I felt for the first time when I found those records, when I was six years old. And I remember thinking: ‘I need to make songs that make me feel this way.’

(Voice memo)

Maia: I walked into the studio, the day I was working on Mona Lisa, knowing that I would be collaborating with two people that I really, really look up to and love. And both of them are incredible, strong women in music. Pom Pom is the producer of the song and the co-writer, Rosie, who has her own artist project as well. And I feel like the excitement in the session room that day was just really palpable. I was talking with them about how I wanted to make a song that could kind of just be about, seeing yourself as beautiful and seeing yourself as art, and just make it really playful and a fun way to reference a bunch of other art.

(Ukulele)

Pom Pom picked up a ukulele. And she played the verse chords. And it just felt like this really, like, happy and light strumming pattern. And then from there, we really worked on trying to figure out the chorus melody.

(Voice memo)

Maia: You know, I didn't grow up with a lot of forms of representation that really felt like reflected my identity or self. And, you know, even thinking about something as famous as a painting, like the Mona Lisa – the Mona Lisa is a white woman. And so I didn't really necessarily see myself in major forms of famous media – whether it was paintings, or plays, or movies, or TV shows. So it was fun to kind of think about, *okay, I'm gonna make a song that has a very famous painting as the title, and I'm gonna be the famous painting.*

(Vocals with Ukulele: “I wanna be a Mona Lisa / Ahh / The kind of girl that you can dream of / Ahh”)

Maia: I first learned how to play the ukulele when I was 12 years old in my music class. It was very new to me. I had only been classically trained on cello and violin, and so there was this new instrument that had no rules.

(Ukulele)

Maia: And I really loved it. And I kept playing the ukulele through high school and eventually releasing songs with it and it became just kind of this through line that existed through everything. And I think it was important to me to figure out a way to move on from it. I don't want to be the ukulele girl for the rest of my life. I wanna be just a girl *(laughs)*.

So I was really adamant about the fact that I was like, 'this needs to be bigger. It needs to be a lot grander than just this instrument.'

(Ukulele and beat)

Maia: And that's why this song had so many more elements that we added on. We wanted to make it sound really sweeping, and I knew that we couldn't do that with just the ukulele.

(Ukulele and beat)

(Music ends)

Maia: I love strings. As somebody who is trained on playing strings, I think I am a big proponent of putting them into my songs. I think they add a lot. But I am not the pickiest strings player that ever existed in the world. So the string sounds are literally just a plugin that Pom had on her computer.

(Strings)

Maia: Session musicians are awesome, but if you can just get an idea across and put it down on the day of, or whatever it is, it doesn't need to be more complicated than that.

(Vocals with beat: "I've always played the parts of Shakespeare / I hide behind the ink and pen")

Maia: My brain is very satisfied by the idea of playing in a play as Shakespeare, who's a playwright. Like okay, we get it, like you nailed the joke into the ground. Like that's fine, whatever.

(Vocals and beat: "I'm so tired of being a book on the shelf / Tired of stories for somebody else / Think I'm ready to start a new chapter")

(Shimmers)

We wanted to make it sound sparkly and have like Disney vibes, and make it feel fantastical.

(Beat plays)

Maia: The writing for Mona Lisa was kind of proudly taking that sort of campiness in the lyrics and the writing, and just running with it. And not trying to hide the fact that it's kind of an absurd concept to think of yourself as the Mona Lisa. But viewing it more as kind of a performance allowed for more honesty and vulnerability to come through.

(Vocals: "So is there anybody out there who could change my point of view?")

Maia: When I wrote that lyric, it was kind of this question of like, "why am I even writing this in the first place? Is there somebody else that could do this for me?" It's exhausting to make art constantly about your experience and everything. How nice would it be to have somebody else take the reins and do it for you and not have it fall upon your shoulders?"

(Vocals and beat: "I'm so tired of being a book on the shelf (Book on the shelf / Tired of stories for somebody else (Somebody else) / Think I'm ready to start a new chapter")

Maia: It's really fun to make songs with the intention of performing them live. And "Mona Lisa" was one of those songs that was made, knowing that there would be areas where people shout back and, you know, sing with you. And it's like, "I'm so tired of being a book on the shelf,

(Backing vocals: "Shelf")

Maia: "tired of stories for somebody else,"

(Backing vocals: "Else")

Maia: like these are these big moments that I intentionally put into the song, knowing that it would be something that people were going to sing with me

(Vocals: "I've been looking for some way to turn it around (Turn it around) / Looking for someone to give me the crown (Give me the crown) / I wanna feel like I finally matter")

Maia: I think that gang vocals add this really great texture. It also is a great way to include like these people who you're working with into the song that you're making. And I love having this kind of joint *(laughs)* experience of everyone being involved in the recording.

(Voice memo: Woo! Hey! Woo! (laughs) Woo!)

Maia: We were just trying to get the clap track to have like more texture to it and just adding kind of weird ad libs throughout it, but it just ended up kind of going off the rails *(laughs)*.

(Voice memo with claps: We sound like dads at a baseball game!)

We were all just having a little too much fun and ended up sounding like, quote, "dads at a baseball game," where we're just going, "whoop! Yep!" in the background.

(Voice memo with claps: "Three strikes!")

(Guitars)

Maia: Luke Niccoli who executive produced this song after Pom finished off, kind of, her main framework for it. He's an incredible guitarist, so he can just kind of like pick up anything and add it.

(Guitar ends)

Maia: So we put birds into the song.

(Birds)

To kind of also build something maybe that feels more fantastical and airy? I guess they have a really airy quality about them. I mean, they're birds for God's sake, you know? *(laughs)* You know, it makes me think of, like, a Disney princess montage scene where, like, she gets out of bed and the birds are like carrying her out of the bed. And then she's dancing around, and like I feel like it was just a cute little touch.

(Piano and synth)

(Vocals join with strings: "I think I'm ready for my close up, baby / There's nothing left to do / There's nothing left to lose / Let me be your muse")

Maia: I test all music that I make on my younger cousins. I need to make sure that they enjoy it. If they like a song, then I've done something correctly. I could care less if, like a dude in his fifties tells me that she doesn't like my music.

(Beat plays)

Maia: But I care so much if my seven-year-old cousin does not like my songs. So I gave it to her, and I made her listen to it, and she just danced to it the whole entire time. And I remember thinking, "ahh this is exactly the way I want my music to make people feel."

(Beat plays)

That unfiltered joy they feel is just more important to me and makes me feel so much more satisfied with the work that I'm doing. If they have fun dancing to it, that's the thing that they're gonna remember. That'll be their *Hairspray* and their *Mama Mia*, it's gonna be my song, "Mona Lisa," and that's awesome. *(laughs)*

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Mona Lisa" by mxmtoon, in its entirety.

("Mona Lisa" by MXMTOON)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download this song. And you can watch the music video. Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were made by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley and Casey Deal, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker and Nick Song. 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.

