

Song Exploder
Billie Eilish - Everything I Wanted
Episode 197

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.

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(“Everything I Wanted” by BILLIE EILISH)

Hrishikesh: Billie Eilish started releasing music when she was 14 years old. Her debut album came out last year, when she was 17. It debuted at Number 1 on Billboard, it went triple platinum, and won five Grammys. Billie made that record with her brother and creative partner, and producer and artist Finneas. While working on that album, they also started writing this song, “Everything I Wanted,” which came out as a single in November 2019. It was Billie’s second top ten hit, and it went double platinum too. I spoke to both Billie and Finneas about how the song was made and in this episode, you’ll hear the original voice memo they made while writing, and the two of them explain why the song was almost never finished.

(“Everything I Wanted” by BILLIE EILISH)

Billie: My name is Billie Eilish.

Finneas: My name is Finneas. I am a co-writer and producer on this song.

(Music fades out)

Billie: So the first night that we wrote it was I think September 2018.

Finneas: We were at the tail end of working on Billie’s debut album, and we were having that sort of second guessing moment, where we thought, “Do we have every song for this album? Should we try writing one or two more?”

Billie: And I literally had had a dream the night before that I had jumped off like a building or something, I jumped off something in my dream and I basically had died in my dream. And the whole dream was me watching how everything went after I died like I was there for it, and I could see everything and I was looking at my life through like, my nonexistence, just seeing how it was going. I remember in the dream there were newspapers that said like, "Problematic 16-year-old Billie Eilish has finally killed herself." And my best friends were like, doing an interview and they were like, you know, "Oh we never really liked her, like we're pretty glad that she died." So it was definitely like one of those dreams that was like everything you've been thinking put into a horrible, horrible reality [laughter]. I couldn't think of anything else, it was the only thing that was on my mind. So I was very, very caught up and distracted and distant the entire day. And I couldn't stop thinking about it, I couldn't stop like feeling it, and being scared and like worried, and so we just sat down, and I told Finneas about it, and we just like had to write about it. I don't know, it just, it needed to be said.

Finneas: Billie has been, you know, not only my primary collaborator for the last five years, but my most intertwined creative relationship.

Billie: Finneas is like my best friend in the world and has been, and I definitely would have talked about it with Finneas, even if we hadn't been making music at all. Having Finneas listen and also know me in a way that I don't know me, has really been important for our creative process.

Finneas: I think one of the benefits of Billie being such an assertive person and having such a clear cut vision, is that when I am working on music production for her, I know the color palette that something should be. So I crafted what became almost the entire instrumental of the song.

(Piano riff)

Finneas: What I try to do with instrumentals is like have something that feels organic and human, and then put it on its edge and play it in a way that might be a little atypical. So you know, just a piano for the first 20 seconds of the song - how can I make that unique? And so that was when the sidechain compression idea came to me.

(Sidechain compression on piano)

Finneas: Side-chaining in this song's case, it's a compression plugin put on the piano and then configured to react not to the piano itself, but to the information of another track, in this case, a kick drum.

(Kick drum)

Finneas: And in this case, a muted kick drum.

(Kick drum ends)

Finneas: And so you get this sort of

(Piano riff)

Finneas: undulating like tide going in and out feeling on the piano without even having to hear the kick drum.

(Piano riff)

Finneas: And then it comes in halfway through the verse.

(Kick drum along with piano)

Billie: The piano is so beautiful. It just drew me in like right away.

Finneas: 95% of the time Billie is there the entire time I'm working on production because she is so informative to it, and she'll save me a ton of time. You know if she's not there, I could really quickly go off the deep end into an area that she wouldn't like. And so Billie's kind of always there to guide it.

(Piano riff fades out)

(Kick drum)

Finneas: There's this kind of like tonal snare to the song, which is actually just a synth layer, but it only plays on the twos and fours.

(Tonal snare along with kick drum)

Finneas: It sounds like the snare is like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, like an ice pick hitting a, you know, gold mine or something, right? It has that like “ting” sound, which I just thought was super interesting.

(*Tonal snare*)

Finneas: That combined with the sidechain compression of the piano, those were the two things that got us excited.

(*Tonal snare along with piano*)

Finneas: And then we were just writing to that.

(*Tonal snare along with piano end*)

Finneas: This was all in the bedroom that I had in my parents' house in Highland Park. The best thing that I had in my childhood bedroom, is my grandad's beat up upright Everett piano. I mean that piano sitting there just as an acoustic instrument in the room is such a huge help in terms of writing songs. Because you play the loop but the loop on your computer can like drive you crazy. And so just sitting there and playing the piano, and going as slow as you want and picking up a chord change, if you want it to be there, is so vital.

(*Voice memo of Billie on vocals and Finneas on piano: “I, wait-”*)

Billie: My brother and I have voice memos on our phone and we record everything we do, and we record all types of stuff.

Finneas: That audio file is essentially us doing what we always do when we write songs, which is just make-believing them into existence. And I think it is also one of the many advantages of working with your sibling is, it's a very vulnerable process to be just singing gibberish and bad melodies over stuff for an hour to get the right thing. Because it's too scary. You know, luckily Billie is not intimidated by me at all.

(*Voice memo continues: “I had a dream / I got everything I wanted / But it’s not what you think / I got everything I wanted” / *vocal mumbles**)

Finneas: She's perfectly comfortable to sing any idea that comes into her head until she comes up with the perfect one.

(Voice memo fades out)

(First verse vocals along with piano): “I had a dream / I got everything I wanted / Not what you'd think / And if I'm being honest / It might've been a nightmare”

Billie: It's a crazy dream. Dreams are so weird. I was also really depressed at the time and, you know, had been suicidal in the past and it was weird telling Finneas about the dream I had because I was like, “Well I had this dream, that I kinda got what I wanted. Which is, you know, dying.” Which is ridiculous. And when I think about it now it's like, Jesus Christ, that's dark, but to be honest with you it was real.

Finneas: You know, Billie's the person that I love most in the world, so hearing the person that you love most in the world talk about something that's so clearly bleak was an upsetting experience.

Billie: In the actual dream when I jumped off there were fans, standing there at the bottom, and they just filmed me jump off and nobody did anything.

(First verse vocals along with piano: “Thought I could fly / So I stepped off the Golden, mm / Nobody cried / Nobody even noticed / I saw them standing right there / Kinda thought they might care”)

Billie: Finneas got mad because he didn't wanna write about it, you know, he didn't like to think of me, as in this headspace.

Finneas: I think it actually was really scary to me, when we were writing the song, to hear her articulate her depression, in a way that was sort of more obvious than I think she was making it on a day-to-day basis. And so that was kind of alarming. I got pretty flipped out and told her so.

(Tonal snare)

Billie: I remember it became like an entire like family argument. Like my mom came in and tried to be, you know, the mediator, and then it was just a lot of yelling from me pretty much, because I couldn't believe that they were telling me that like I shouldn't be writing about this. And I realized in the middle of it that they just didn't understand that it was actually how I felt. Like they didn't see that. So I

went into my room and I like locked myself in my room and it was so, so intense, and because of that, we didn't write the rest of it for like probably half a year.

(Tonal snare ends)

Billie: We were really stuck for like a second. We didn't really know where to go with it. Because it was such a downer of a song.

Finneas: The song definitely wouldn't have been the same song that it ended up being, had we written every word of it that day. I think sort of life had to move on and the place that Billie was in, and the place that I was in when we ended up finishing the song, was a really different mental state.

Hrishikesh: In March 2019, Billie's debut album came out, and it was an instant hit. By June, it had sold over a million copies in the US alone. But "Everything I Wanted" wasn't on it.

Finneas: We didn't finish it in time for the album, but we liked everything that we had for it.

Billie: And in August or something, we kind of opened it back up.

Finneas: Over the summer, we toured a bunch. And every time I had a guitar in a green room for the next year, I would play those chords and like try to

(Keyboard chords)

Finneas: pick out the next line. So there was like line by line it would come together in like places like Victoria, Australia, and then we'd get another line in Berlin, Germany.

Billie: And because I was getting better mentally and I was working on my mental health, I was like seeing it from a new perspective. And also wanting it to be a different perspective. And I remember we were sitting in Finneas' room, and we were like, "Well, what is the end of this song? Like where does it go? It's talking about a horrible thing that happened, how do we make that better? What do we do that can help people that feel that way too?" And we just kind of both I feel like, realized at the same time, that the two of us, meaning me and my brother Finneas, were that. And that we were gonna make the chorus about us and our relationship with each other, and how we've both pulled each other out of dark places in our lives.

(Keyboard chords end)

Finneas: We were parsing our way through the chorus, and we were trying to figure out how to change the narrator. Because obviously the verse is in first person, and the chorus is also in first person, but they're playing different roles. And so I thought if we introduced the chorus with, "And you say," that recontextualized everything. And then it allows it to be a conversation as opposed to one person.

(Chorus vocals along with keyboard chords: "And you say, "As long as I'm here / No one can hurt you / Don't wanna lie here / But you can learn to")

Finneas: "Don't wanna lie here, but you can learn to," I think is a great Billie expression, which is just like, you can deal with it like you can deal with essentially what we all do throughout our lives at certain points, which is like exist because others need us to sometimes, you know. I think there are days we've all had in our lives where we would check out that day. We'd go upstairs and put the covers over us for the entire duration of that 24-hour period because we do not have the drive or the motivation. But you're called upon by other people in your life to be there for them. And so, the song essentially became a song about our own relationship with each other, which was that, you know, we'd ride or die. That we'd like be there for each other through terrible experiences and the greatest experiences. That's the two way street of, you know, having a sibling, is you have this person who is just interwoven into your life, I mean especially in our case, just because we've made a career together.

(Keyboard chords end)

Billie: And then especially because this song is about him and I, it just, it made sense to have his voice in there.

(Finneas harmonized vocals: "As long as I'm here / No one can hurt you / Don't wanna lie here / But you can learn to")

Finneas: Because I put out music on my own and produce music for other artists, there have been a few articles written about me that have titles that are like, you know, "Finneas is more than just Billie Eilish's brother." And my counter to that is always like,

(Keyboard chords)

Finneas: "I don't care if I'm anything more than that. Like that is plenty to me." I think that, that really became part of the narrative of the song was that it was not a romantic love song, it was a love song written by like a family member that loves you.

(Finneas and Billie sing together along with keyboard chords: "If I could change / The way that you see yourself / You wouldn't wonder why you hear / They don't deserve you")

Billie: Once we just got the vibe of where it was gonna go and how it was gonna play out, that's kinda when the song clicked. And I don't think we would've been able to write that had I still been in that really, really dark headspace, because I don't think I would've been able to find a light in that, you know, hole that I was in.

Finneas: So we came home from that tour in September, and finished the song in the next couple of weeks.

(Piano riff)

Finneas: Second verse architecture in songs is like all about reintroducing the same ideas in a compelling attention-grabbing way. And I felt that the piano's presence had become kind of taken for granted. And the way to get someone to pay attention to something is to take it out

(Piano riff ends)

Finneas: and put it back in.

(Piano riff resumes)

Finneas: So I pulled it out,

(Piano riff fades)

Finneas: I introduced this kind of like low chordal bass arpeggio.

(Second verse vocals along with low chordal bass arpeggio: "I tried to scream / But my head was underwater")

Finneas: I've always been a huge fan of sort of like literalization of lyrics. So I loved the idea of pulling out all of the high end on her voice when she says, "My head was underwater," just hear kind of muffled sounds.

(*Processed vocals: "But my head was underwater / They called me weak"*)

Billie: There's so many vocals that you would never even notice if somebody didn't play them isolated.

(*Isolated Billie vocals: "weak", "fly (fly)"*)

(*First verse vocals: "Thought I could fly (fly) / So I stepped off the Golden, mm"*)

Billie: If they're harmonies, if they're like a little whisper, if they're like just repeating the word.

(*Pre-chorus vocals with second line whispered: "But when I wake up, I see / You with me"*)

Billie: It really changes a song like I did so many vocals. It's just so fun to see like what your brain comes up with without you even thinking.

(*Second verse harmonized vocals along with tonal snare: "it feels like yesterday was a year ago / But I don't wanna let anybody know / 'Cause everybody wants something from me now / And I don't wanna let 'em down"*)

Billie: That like space between, you just got big and then you have to make something else, is a very scary place. All you wanna do is satisfy. And because my album had come out, and because you know, I was having this really big moment, but I had been touring all summer and I hadn't really put stuff out. All you're thinking about is like, "How do I make them still care about me?" Which is something I never thought about before. I didn't give a damn who cared about me and who didn't, but because of that little space between like first album and the next thing you put out, it's a big deal. And this was when I was doing good, like I was happy. I was living my life. I was doing really good. But at the same time I was like, very aware of the fact that there were a lot of people that I could let down.

(*Second verse vocals along with low chordal bass arpeggio, kick drum and tonal snare: "'Cause everybody wants something from me now / And I don't wanna let 'em down"*)

Billie: And then there's the outro, which is, you know, "If I knew it all then, would I do it again?" That's like the epitome of what that dream was, talking about fame and, you know, if you were to commit suicide and you could see how life went after that, would you do it again?

(Outro vocals along with piano riff: "If I knew it all then would I do it again? / Would I do it again? / If they knew what they said would go straight to my head / What would they say instead?")

Hrishikesh: You said that line is also about fame. And to the extent that it's about that. Do you have an answer, if you knew it all then, would you do it again?

Billie: It's ahhh, would I? I, for a while there, I thought, "No, I would not." But I think now, I would do it again.

(Piano riff)

Billie: I never ever thought that I would be able to say that I got out of that dark place. Since then, yes, I have changed so, so much, and I worked on my life and I like held on, and I just basically was patient, and got out of it. And I can't even believe that. And it doesn't mean that I'm always gonna be happy for the rest of my life now, I'm gonna have times where I go back into a dark place, but it is important to remember that you do get out of that, and it's just gonna happen again, but you're gonna do it again and you're gonna be okay again.

Finneas: I think more than anything, it made the song more interesting to me to go there, to start in a place of like this hopelessness and to arrive at this sort of destination of like companionship and love. Because that is the truth of my life and of Billie's life is just that we are both there for each other and our parents are both there for us, and we're just really lucky in that sense.

(Keyboard chords)

Billie: It's interesting, because that's like one of the only songs we've ever written where, you know, half of it was written in a super different place than the other half. I fully can listen to it and not relive it, and I think that it's because of where we took the song. That's what it needed. It needed that because that's what I needed. You need somebody that's gonna be like, "I am here for you."

(Keyboard chords)

Billie: It's nice to look back and like have gotten better and happier in life, but, you know, it's important that, I think, we remember how we did feel so that we're grateful for how we feel now. I think now when I listen to it, it almost feels like better to listen, because it shows me how much I've grown.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Everything I Wanted," by Billie Eilish, in its entirety.

(*"Everything I Wanted" by Billie Eilish*)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Billie Eilish and Finneas. You'll find links to buy or stream "Everything I Wanted," and you can watch the music video for it, which Billie herself directed.

Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. You can also follow the show on Twitter and Instagram @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.