

Song Exploder
Brittany Howard - Stay High
Episode 168

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Stay High" by BRITTANY HOWARD)

Thao: Brittany Howard is the guitarist and lead singer of the four-time Grammy-winning band Alabama Shakes. This month, she's releasing her first solo album, called *Jaime*. In this episode, Brittany breaks down the song "Stay High," which was the album's first single. She started working on it while staying at a house in Topanga Canyon, near LA.

("Stay High" by BRITTANY HOWARD)

(Music fades out)

Brittany: I was in Topanga last July. I came out here to start writing a record. I remember sitting in the living room and had this old acoustic guitar. And just picked it up and started playing the [sings riff].

(Acoustic guitar)

Brittany: It wasn't anything special. It was just like a A to a D. And it was like really fluid with no accents on any of the strumming.

(Acoustic guitar)

Brittany: And I was like, "I like that. That's like a breath of fresh air to me, you know. It's nice and airy and simple." And then I had the idea for the chorus.

(Chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I just want to stay high with you")

Brittany: When I have an idea, I get everything at once. I hear the drums, I hear the bass, I hear everything and where it's going, and I have to run to some place to put it down immediately. Because it's kind of like a fish on a line. You know, you got the fish on, don't snap it off, like you got to keep working with that fish. And you got to do it now because you can't fight a fish all night, you know what I mean? And so, once I felt like, "Okay, I have a song coming here," like ran to my little

studio. It was like in a greenhouse, it was super hot in there. I just ran in. I had bought a air conditioner for it, but every time I had to record, I had to turn it off. So it was like a hundred something degrees inside of this greenhouse. And just, I was like, I have to go as quickly as possible because, one, I'll probably die of heatstroke in here and two, I'll lose the song if I don't go as quickly as possible. So that rhythmic guitar part was the first thing.

(Acoustic guitar)

Brittany: And then I started doing the drum part on the back of the guitar.

(Back of guitar hits)

Brittany: Then I just started singing once I got that far. It just all came out in one go really, I didn't have to think about it. It just came out finished.

(Vocals join guitar and beat: "Cause where I come from / Everybody frowns and walks around / With that ugly thing on their face / And where I come from / We work hard and grind and hustle all day")

(Guitar and beat continue)

Brittany: The lyrics for this song, I knew immediately they were supposed to juxtapose how dreamy and playful and innocent and childlike the music was. Like to me, the music is like sunlight. And then I wanted for the lyrics to sound more corrupted, like the voice that's speaking has lived life. And they're saying, "Yeah, I work hard all day. Yeah, this is how life is. I can't ever get over the hump. However, I'm going home to my family at the end of the day and this is what makes me keep trying and keep working. And I'm cool with that."

(Vocals join guitar and beat: "There comes a time, comes a time / At night, where we get to play / I just want to stay high with you")

Brittany: I've always had jobs, sometimes I've had two jobs at once. I grew up in a place where we didn't have any money. My parents both worked really hard but sometimes it's just hard to get over that hump, you know what I mean? I grew up in a trailer park. And then as soon as I was old enough to get a job, I think I was around 14 or 15 years old, I bagged groceries and I never stopped working until I was a mail carrier. And then finally, you know, when Alabama Shakes was

found I could quit my job. It was like the best day of my life [laughter]. One of the best days of my life for sure.

(Guitar and beat)

Brittany: So I recorded the demo,

(Guitar and beat fades out)

Brittany: but really I was thinking about trashing it just because I didn't want to go back to this kind of throwback R&B deal, paint myself in a corner of like I'm only, I only do a few things, like I only have a few functions as a songwriter and as a singer. And I was just really leery of doing that again. And I had been staying in Topanga with my partner, she was going to finish writing her book. So we both had our own creative spaces, and at the end of the day, we would sit together on the porch and just talk about how our creative days went. So I went sat down on the porch, and she was like, "Well, what did you do today?" And I said, "Well, I did write something." And she was like, "Okay, let me hear it." And I was like, "I don't know about it." I said, "I think I took a step in the wrong direction." And she was like, "But let's hear it." And I played it.

(Demo instrumental)

Brittany: And immediately she was like, "Oh that's it. That's the single." And I was like, "Ah, I don't think so. I don't know if I want to like go back to this place." But she was like, "You know, if you like it, there's something you like, then you should pursue it and just share that with people. It doesn't matter." And I was like, "All right."

(Demo instrumental fades out)

Brittany: So then I had decided, "Okay, I'm not going to trash this song." So I took it to the studio, and I showed it to Shawn Everett, my engineer. And he was like, "Oh, yeah, let's track it. Let's go. This is great." Me and Shawn work really well together, because my demos come pretty complete with ideas, and he takes my 2D image of what I'm trying to do and turns it into like 4D. And so, I was playing the drum track of my demo, just on the back of acoustic guitar. So I had this really cool sound already.

(Back of guitar hits)

Brittany: And then, when it came time to actually put down the real tracks for the record, you know, we got Nate Smith who's a world class drummer. Comes in the studio, and everyday Shawn Everett has made him a kit based on what kind of drum sound we want for what kind of song we're doing. So this day, it was time to do "Stay High," and I remember coming in and Shawn has got a snare drum where the kick drum should be and then just the snare drum and I think like one ride cymbal. But he's got all these little pressure mics all over, these little black microphones stuck on each thing with like this puddy. And so Nate comes into sit down, and he's going like, "Man, what is this?" And we're all laughing. And we're just like, "I can't believe that this is a kit that we're going to track." Then Shawn gives him two chopsticks and says "Here, play with these." And I mean we're just dying in the studio. We can't believe it. We think it's a joke. It's not a joke. Shawn starts rolling and says, "All right, here it comes. You ready?" And Nate's like, "All right, man."

(Drums)

Brittany: And then so I'm sitting in the control room, and I'm hearing it and I'm going, "This sounds amazing." Techy and very texturous. I mean it sounded great. And I was like, "Don't question Shawn. He knows what he's doing. He's a mad genius."

(Drums)

Brittany: Zac Cockrell is playing bass on this track.

(Bass)

Brittany: So in my demos, when I first did this song, all I had was the bass doing this repetitive [sings the bass]. I tried to keep the bass never changing chords as much as possible, just because to me, it's like a very grounding element in the song, gives you something to hang onto, you know, rise with the drums.

(Drums along with bass)

Brittany: Just true rhythm section style, nothing fancy. And then Zac shows up and he was like, "Hey, I kind of had this idea for the bass part." He started playing the [sings the bass].

(Bass)

Brittany: It's a hook all on its own. And his intentions were kind of to play that throughout the song. And he was like, "But what do you think?" And I said, "Do both."

(Drums along with bass)

Brittany: And then I was like, "Okay, the bassline's very simple, the drums very simple. What can I top off this sandwich with?"

(Drums along with original bass part end)

Brittany: I just wanted to find something high and sparkly and dreamy. And when we got to the studio, I was so surprised to see that they actually had a celeste. Robert Glasper played celeste on this track.

(Celeste)

Thao: A celeste is like a piano, but when you play a note, instead of a hammer hitting piano strings, the hammer hits a metal plate. And Robert Glasper is an acclaimed, Grammy-winning jazz pianist.

(Celeste)

Brittany: Yeah so Rob Glasper did the key parts on this song. I had originally written them on my demo.

(Demo keys)

Brittany: And then Rob listened to what I had done one time through and then went in there and played it his way.

(Celeste)

(Drums along with bass)

Brittany: When it comes to this song, the kind of saving grace for me like from the demo to being excited about it was when I started performing it live in the studio. And I started hearing the sounds and the way that it felt to sing over them. And I thought, "Well, this just feels good."

(Vocals along with drums and bass: "I already feel like doing it again, honey / 'Cause once you know, then you know / And you don't wanna go / Back to wherever it is that you come from, yeah")

Brittany: I went in and just did a quick vocal take and it was easy, effortless, it was cool, it was fun. For me to enjoy songwriting, I like for all of it to go together, everything informs the other thing, you know. So when I'm doing a vocal performance, I got to sound like I'm cool and relaxed and having fun, no big deal. So I do this little laughs in between, and it was just because I was having a good time. I mean I was, it's important. That's information we're taking down, recording, running on tape, mastering and then serving up and it's important that I'm in it.

(Vocals with faint acoustic guitar and drums: "Yes, we do / There comes a time [laughs], there comes a time / At night, where we get to play")

Brittany: I wanted it to sound intimate, having lots of texture, picking up lots of sibilance, having every little detail, picking up all the gravel, and all that important information. I'm not looking necessarily for perfection because when you're trying to tell someone how you feel, perfection's not always the way to go. I'm looking for the heart, the emotion, what kind of story is giving someone just by the tone, by the style. So I kind of sing it real snakey, you know, cold blooded and cool and no straight lines, no technical perfection, when I'm singing, it's always kind of moving all over the place the whole song.

(Vocals with faint acoustic guitar and drums: "'Cause where I come from / Everybody frowns and walks around / With that ugly thing on their face")

Brittany: So where I come from, there's a saying that says, "Get that ugly thing off your face." And this means quit frowning. That's what it means. You never know what's going to strike with people too. But this song feels good, and I think it's an important time right now to make people feel good.

(Acoustic guitar)

Brittany: It's crazy out there man.

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "And where I come from / We work hard and grind and hustle all day / Yes, we do")

Brittany: And then for the chorus, I needed them to hit a chord that did the thing that got into my skin, got into my spine. So I was more careful when I was crafting these choruses just because I wanted them to do that thing where all the harmonies lineup in a certain way, where it feels like a lush chord.

(Chorus group vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I just want to stay high with you")

(Acoustic guitar along with celeste)

Brittany: The song exists primarily just to stay positive. It's hard. I know what it's like to leave your job that you just worked 13 hours at and you're soaked in sweat, and you're thirsty, and your feet hurt, and your knees hurt. And you go home, and you're like, "I can't wait to practice tonight," because that's what brought me joy, was making music, playing music. I could not wait to go to practice after a day of work like that, because it made me happy and that's what I lived for at the time.

(Acoustic guitar)

Brittany: That's what I was trying to give to people. Look for that thing that lights you up. Look for that thing that brings you joy.

(Celeste ends)

Thao: And now, here is "Stay High," by Brittany Howard, in its entirety.

("Stay High" by BRITTANY HOWARD)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Brittany Howard and to watch the video for "Stay High." Terry Crews is in it, and it's great. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.

Song Exploder is made by Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, Thao Nguyen. I'm guest hosting for the year, sitting in for Hrishikesh. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, you can see his portrait of Brittany Howard on the Song Exploder website or Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can follow me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.