

Song Exploder
Cat Power - Woman
Episode 145

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.

(“Woman” by CAT POWER)

Hrishikesh: Chan Marshall is a singer-songwriter who's been making records under the name Cat Power since 1995. In 2018, she put out her tenth album, *Wanderer*. It includes this song “Woman,” which has Lana Del Rey on backing vocals. In this episode, Chan breaks down the song and what it means to her, as she tells the story of how she made “Woman” in Miami and Los Angeles over the course of a few years.

(“Woman” by CAT POWER)

Chan: My name is Chan Marshall.

(Music fades)

Chan: This song, “Woman,” was inspired by events that happened in my life that I’m not ready to talk about yet. But the reason I wrote this song is because I couldn’t find the words to describe how I was feeling inside, very alone. Because I wasn’t feeling empowered or strong as a woman. The beginnings of writing it, was just a few of these guitar chords that have been strumming in my alone time.

(Guitar)

Chan: And then, I began singing.

(Vocals with guitar: “If I had a dime for every time / Tell me I’m not what you need / If I had a quarter, I would pull it together / And I would take it to the bank and then leave / Yes, I would take it to the bank and then leave”)

Chan: The beginning lyric where it says, “If I had a dime for every time you tell me I’m not what you need, I would take it to the bank and leave,” is because I would’ve been a billionaire with all the different situational, abusive times this had been in

my ears, that I wasn't good enough or whatever. And that was the beginning, was this just lament.

(Guitar)

Chan: And I have a lot of little things like that that I'll have had for many years. Some of those kind of little things I do by myself when I play solo. I'll sing them intermittently, these small laments in different shows around the world. But there's a lot of them that have never been recorded, and so I have lost many. I felt a real sadness at some of these songs that are gone, that I have no memory of. But those songs served purpose for me whether they were recorded or anybody heard them or not. They helped me get through whatever moment in time I needed some help. And that's where it was for a long time, was just that lament.

(Vocal with guitar: "If I had a dime for every time / Tell me I'm not what you need")

Chan: I'm also a new single mom. And when I was recording, you know, I had my little baby, you know, just in my house, recording in my home studio. This pink house in Miami. I like that I got to begin it there, because I was alone, with my dogs, you know, and my belly, while we were setting the studio up. And then after my son was born, you know, so the first two months were in that realm. Once you have a kid, all the stuff that maybe made you sad before doesn't make you sad anymore. When you have a kid it's like, "Oh, I'm much stronger than I was before, and I don't have time for any of that beepity beep beep, you know?" And I think that made it easier for me to sit with these laments I've been traveling around with all these years, and meditate on what else I'd like to say. And so through a lot of time passing, that little lament became the skeleton.

(Electric guitar)

Chan: I started adding more collarbone.

(Acoustic guitar joins)

Chan: And then a leg,

(Keyboard joins)

Chan: and it started to grow.

(Drums join)

Chan: When it came time to flesh out the song, "Woman," I had very clear sounds already in my brain that I tried to find.

(Music ends)

Chan: I love the Rhodes sound.

(Keyboard)

Chan: The lament to me sounds questioning? Doesn't sound resolved at all. The Rhodes, just the intonation, the notes, it sounds like it's moving forward in a way, of like one foot in front of the other.

(Keyboard)

Chan: Like the beginning of the new journey.

(Keyboard)

Chan: And also the bass I knew that I needed what I needed, which was [sings bass melody]. But what I really wanted was a slide in on the [sings bass melody with the slide].

(Bass)

Chan: Whenever I am trying to get an exact note played, I have to sing it as best I can. I didn't want a sustained [sings bass melody with long first note]. So I made sure to get a [sings bass melody with the slide].

(Bass)

Chan: I then came out here to LA to work with Rob Schnapf for mixing, and went to his studio, Mant.

(Banjo)

Chan: That's an electric banjo from Rob Schnapf that I played. I forgot that that's in the song but it's exactly where I wanted it to be [laughter].

(*Banjo*)

Chan: It was the return, the return to verse.

(*Guitar*)

Chan: I just felt, similar to how the Rhodes reminds me of one foot in front of the other, in my brain I heard that note, which equaled to me vast terrain. So then I needed to go do that note.

(*Banjo joins*)

Chan: My brain wanted those sounds.

(*Strings*)

Chan: Like a thick cloth to keep that part of the song warm.

(*Strings*)

(*Strings fade*)

Chan: I wrote the song because I needed strength, and I needed empowerment, and I needed to do it myself.

(*Vocals: "A cage is like a weapon, a tool for me / You think I'm like the other ones / Well, my cage is a weapon, it's perfect for me / It's the one suit they seem to not see"*)

Chan: “Your cage is like a weapon,” is the social projection on women. There’s a lot of social pressure to be the standard, live up to the standard in so many ways. And I think when I’m saying, “My cage is a weapon, it’s perfect for me,” it’s because it keeps me feeling secure. It’s the one suit you never see, because I’ve always been a tomboy since I’m a little girl, so that’s the suit, is the tomboy clothing. And I think it’s really important for anyone who wants to go against norms to do so. As I began to record more for the song, more instrumentation, background vocal, it was becoming what it became - an homage for, to, about, with women

in general around the world. And young girls too, you know. And people that identify as women.

(*Vocals: "Woman, woman, woman, woman"*)

Chan: But it needed some divine feminine transcendence, which as a tomboy, I don't have sonically with my voice, the way that I sing. So besides my own voice, the backing vocals are Lana Del Rey.

(*Vocals: "Woman, woman, woman, woman"*)

Chan: I met Lana years ago at a hotel pool, and she was such a sweetheart, genuine sweetheart, and that always stayed with me. So, many years passed, and she invited me to go on tour with her in Europe, this past April. There were some personal things going on. And she was a good friend when I needed someone to talk to. So anyway, that's why I asked her to sing on my song. My first thought was, "Maybe you could just sing this intro with me, just me and you."

(*Vocals: "And I would take it to the bank and then leave / Yes, I would take it to the bank and then leave"*)

Chan: Because of the loss when I was making up the song, this lament that I was going through was that needing a buddy. That kind of nod that she's with me. And then it kind of shifted into parts of the rest of the song.

(*Vocals: "Taking the charge (Taking the charge) / I took the lead (I took the lead) / I need you to believe"*)

Chan: There was one song that she sang on this tour that we did in April. And the way that she sang, what she did was so timeless and pure. I felt all kind of ways. Like she could have been in like a calico dress from the 70s and I could have been like four years old, maybe, and I thought about her for this song because of that moment.

(*Vocals: "I'm a woman of my word, now haven't you heard? / My word's the only thing I've ever needed"*)

Chan: I can't hear Lana Del Rey as well as I wish I could, because I can't find my calico girl in there. I actually wish that the background vocals weren't there so that I could hear Lana's dignity.

(Vocals with guitar: “I’m a woman of my word, now haven’t you heard? / My word’s the only thing I’ve ever needed / I’m a woman of my word, now you have heard / My word’s the only thing I truly need”)

Chan: Before doing vocal pass for background vocals, there was lead-in time. So, you press record, you know, “Rolling,” and then the song’s going to come on. So there’s like a preemptive moment there. And so, I wanted to warm up for the song, you know, vocal warmups. I was entering the song at that point. I wanted to be connected within the song, so I was singing, “Woman.”

(Vocals: “Woman, woman, woman”)

Chan: So we left the warmups on for the beginning.

(Vocals with guitar: “Woman, woman, woman”)

(Guitar)

Chan: Being able to write the song allowed me to acknowledge my strength and acknowledge my individual sense of truth in my character, and my constitution that I believe in as a female. That’s why I wrote this song, I needed to have a proclamation for myself.

(Guitars with strings)

Chan: But I don’t look back with this song, I look forward with this song, which is why I think we make art, is to push forward. I don’t know if this song would help but I hope that it makes someone who needs to feel better, feel a little better. That’s all.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “Woman,” by Cat Power, in its entirety.

(“Woman” by CAT POWER)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Cat Power. You can watch the music video there, and you’ll find a link to buy or stream the song.

This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons. The illustration for the episode was done by Carlos Lerma, and you can see that on the Song Exploder website too. Next time on Song Exploder, Janelle Monáe.

(“So Afraid” by JANELLE MONÁE)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you want to share your thoughts on this episode, you can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

(Music fades)

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