

Song Exploder
Common - A Riot In My Mind
Episode 199

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.

("A Riot In My Mind" by COMMON)

Hrishikesh: Common is a Grammy and Oscar-winning rapper, actor, and activist from Chicago. He's been making records since 1992, and in October, he released his thirteenth album, *A Beautiful Revolution*. In this episode, he breaks down how he made the song "A Riot In My Mind" along with a handful of collaborators, including Lenny Kravitz and a cameo from Chuck D.

("A Riot In My Mind" by COMMON)

Common: My name is Common.

(Music fades out)

Common: So at the end of the summer, I was in LA. I wasn't planning on making an album, but what led me to making an album was this song I was working on for a children's show. It was a show called *Bookmarks* where different people, authors, actors read children's books. And these books were, you know, really uplifting in saying, "Hey, we all are one."

("Don't Forget Who You Are" by COMMON ft. PJ)

Common: It's called, "Don't Forget Who You Are," and it's featuring PJ.

(Chorus full track: "Don't forget who you are, da-da-da-da-da-da / Don't forget who you are")

Common: When we made this song, first of all, it just organically felt like, "Oh, man. I love making music, man. This just feels so good to make some music and to be creating with these co-creators that I love." But then it was the reaction to that song which I wrote for children but people I knew were like, "Man, I love this song. It makes me feel good." And it was like a moment where I understood that, "Wait, I need to make some music that's gonna be inspiring, that's gonna uplift, that's gonna bring the energy up, and give hope, and motivate people." So

we wrote that song, got it complete, got it mixed and I said, “Man, let's do some more studio sessions.”

(“Don’t Forget Who You Are” ends)

Common: I had just experienced, like so many of us, the pandemic. And I started seeing the world in a new way, kinda more from a more spiritual way. I started getting more in tune with the Creator, with God. And I also was in a place of seeing what had occurred over the summer with the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and the shooting of Jacob Blake and just the emotional unrest and tension that existed. I actually went out throughout the summer to the protests. I went one time to Minnesota a few weeks after George Floyd's killing for a meeting with some elected officials and community activists. And then I went to Louisville, Kentucky, for a rally for Breonna Taylor, for her family and really encouraging the people of Kentucky to be active in making sure that the people who had killed Breonna Taylor were brought to justice. And that protest really was life-enhancing for me to be a part of. I felt anger. I felt pain. I felt strength. I felt inspired. I felt the inspiration of the people. That really affected me. At that moment I was like, “I'm going to do an album and it's gonna be movement music.”

(Jazz guitar lines)

Common: “A Riot In My Mind” really wasn't constructed until the end of September. I wrote the song with my collaborators, Isaiah Sharkey, Boom Bishop, Karriem Riggins, Robert Glasper, and PJ. At that point, we had a beautiful, colorful collage of music for the album, but I wanna see if we could come up with something else. I don't know exactly what that may be, but I think it should be something hard.

(Jazz guitar lines end)

Common: When I was thinking about movement music, I truly wanted to make sure I captured the anger, the hurt, the angst. So in my mind, soon as I'm saying that, I'm like, I need another raw joint, like a joint where I could just give you that energy where you get charged. So I said I wanted a harder sounding beat. The second day of the studio is going well, but Sharkey has to fly back to Chicago for a performance. And we had done a day's full of work. So we were just sitting around talking and then the suggestion came that we go play a little basketball. So Sharkey and Karriem say, “You know, we gonna stay in and just work 'till

Sharkey gotta leave.” So we come back in after playing, and Karriem starts to play some of the things that they worked on, he was like, “You gotta hear this.”

(More jazz guitar lines)

Common: So I'm listening to this jazz sounding guitar intro, which I love. Sharkey is such a gifted guitarist and musician. It just was sounding beautiful. But then it kicks in with the drums.

(Abrupt transition to drum beat along with rock guitar riff)

Common: He went from a jazz vibe to this hard sounding like rock, funk sound.

(Chords solo for a bar, beat rejoins)

Common: And I'm like, “Man!” Sometimes I hear certain pieces of music and they just take my mind to another place. I give the songs titles sometimes right when we, like I might be freestylin’ and the engineer will say, “What do you wanna call this?” And I'll just come up with whatever. So as soon as I heard this music, I told Michael, the engineer, “Hey, call this “A Riot In My Mind.” So I sat back on the couch, listened to it for a second and was talking, and then I started saying, “Wah, dah, dah, wah, dah, dah, dah, dah. Cassius Clay and the potter.”

(First verse vocals solo for a bar then the beat joins: “Wa-da-da, wa-da-da-da-da / Cassius Clay and the potter”)

(Drum beat)

Common: That thought right there for me, “Wah, dah, dah, wah, dah, dah, dah, dah,” was really me referencing like something from 90's hip-hop that just brought me to that energy. But I said, “Cassius Clay and the potter,” I'm talking about Muhammad Ali and God, bcause I'm saying Cassius Clay and the potter, shape my mind. Referring to God as the potter is definitely a reference from the Bible. You know, I look at us as the clay, we are the clay that the potter has shaped.

(Drum beat ends)

Common: So the first two lines I thought of right there, and then I proceeded to go on and be like, “Man, we gotta use this. This is it.”

(Drum beat along with rock guitar riff)

Common: And then, I got in my truck, which I love to do, and just ride up and down the PCH, playing the beat and rapping out loud to myself. And when I say something I like, I keep it in my mind, and just keep building from there. I haven't written any lyrics down for my album since '94. I just remember it, that's just my process.

(First verse full track: "Build with gods and gangstas whose scars and faces / Traces of racist snakes that debased us / Tried to freebase us, mark of the beast, erase us / But we raised up from East Asia" music fades)

Common: Earlier that day I got a text that my friend, Dwayne Lyle, had passed. He had died. And Dwayne used to always tell me, "Man, when you go in that booth, you gotta come out sweating like John Coltrane playing. You gotta go with that intensity."

(Rock guitar riff)

Common: I went into the booth, "A Riot In My Mind" was giving me the energy. I had my verse ready now. And I just felt it. And I remember walking out of that booth just sweating, my whole t-shirt was drenched in sweat. And I was like, "Man, I feel you Dwayne."

(Second verse vocals along with rock guitar riff: "Held the scroll that told us seven bowls and seven plagues / Babylon, dread the days when the dead are raised / Escapades of the everlasting / Where the ghetto praise for compassion, no longer masking")

Common: So many biblical thoughts come out in my songs. I couldn't say, "Yeah, I'm a supreme scholar on the Bible," but I truly study the Bible. I read it every day, "Seven bowls and seven plagues, Babylon dread the days, where the dead are raised." So we know Babylon is referred to in the bible as like basically a place that's unjust. A place where the people in power weren't doing right. It wasn't a righteous kingdom. It wasn't a righteous place. And I think our country, America, has suffered from the unrighteousness of leadership and unrighteousness of history. But if we don't acknowledge our wounds and mistakes, and things we've caused ourselves or others, then we can never heal. And when I'm talking about dead, I'm talking about symbolically the dead are raised. Like spiritually, we are awakened. And those powers that be in that place that they call Babylon, once people are awakened, you know, it's gonna be a whole 'nother day.

(Second verse vocals along with drum beat: "Held the scroll that told us seven bowls and seven plagues / Babylon, dread the days when the dead are raised / Escapades of the everlasting / Where the ghetto praise for compassion, no longer masking" music fades)

Common: The initial concept for this song: I was gonna write a long verse, like just write one verse. Because I told you I wanted this song to be a rugged joint, I was thinking I wasn't gonna do a melodic hook to this. But I was like, "Man, I need to see if Lenny Kravitz could get on this one."

(Jazz guitar)

Common: You know, I went to Yellow Springs, Ohio, where Dave Chapelle lives and was having concerts, and comedy shows in the corn fields. And we would perform sometimes. Well, Matthew who's a photographer for Dave also works with Lenny, and a couple times we were in the back of the truck riding through the corn fields and he FaceTimed Lenny Kravitz. And we were speaking, I was like, "Man, we gotta do a song." And it felt like we both meant it, but we didn't know if that could, you know, people say that all the time, "We gotta do something." So it could've been just some FaceTime talk. But "A Riot In My Mind," four days later, was created. So I was writing and was like, "I gotta try to get Lenny, see if he'll do this." He hit me and said, "Send the music. If I'm digging it, you know, we'll go from there."

(Jazz guitar ends)

Common: So I sent him the music, and I didn't hear from him for a second because his book had just come out, his new book. So in my process of waiting, I thought, "I need to get PJ to write a hook to this." So if Lenny is so busy and doesn't have time to really work, work on it, we'll have an idea. So I was like, "I need you to write a hook that Lenny can sing. So PJ, she said, "Okay, I'm gonna do it this afternoon."

(Chorus PJ demo: "It's a war outside / When it's quiet, it's a riot in my mind / It's a war outside)

Common: I loved when I heard her singing that. I was like, "Oh, this is it." And then that bridge part, "Gotta get ready." I said, "Man, this is dope, PJ."

(Bridge PJ demo: "Gotta get ready, saddle up / If you really 'bout it, we gon' see, oh yeah / Gotta get ready, time is up / If you been 'bout it, we gon' see, yeah yeah)

Common: I sent that to Lenny. And this was like October second or third where I hadn't heard from Lenny, if he was for surely gonna do it. But I gotta turn in this album by October sixth. So Lenny called me the next day, on the fifth, saying "Man, I love this song." He laid that hook and I was listening on FaceTime like, "Oh my God, we got Lenny."

(Lenny chorus vocals along with rock guitar riff for four bars, then beat joins: "It's a war outside / When it's quiet, it's a riot in my mind / It's a war outside / Won't be quiet, it's a riot in my mind")

Common: His energy was just so incredible and so inspiring. And just, he loves doing it. He was like, "Yo, you could use whatever you want on this."

(Lenny bridge vocals along with drum beat: "Gotta get ready, saddle up / If you really 'bout it, we gon' see, oh yeah / Gotta get ready, time is up / If you been 'bout it, we gon' see, oh yeah")

(Bass)

Common: And then we wanted to put some scratches in there.

(DJ scratches along with bass)

Common: I was engulfed and have been engulfed in 90's hip-hop since the pandemic, because I work out to 90's hip-hop. And all of it just been so inspiring, and I wanted something Public Enemy-ish, I asked DJ Dummy to basically find a scratch that's Public Enemy-ish. And then he was like, "Man, you should just get Chuck to do a vocal and I'll scratch it. So we asked Chuck D to do a vocal thing and let DJ Dummy scratch it.

(Scratches)

Common: And then DJ Dummy had the idea and added more sirens to it.

(Sirens along with scratches and drum beat)

Common: It helped give me the energy that I needed to create this music and to remind me of what revolutionary music can be. I wanted something that was hard that had a roughness to it. But I never would've imagined that "A Riot In My Mind" would be what it is, and sound like what it is. Just to be able to take the song and

havin' Chuck D on it, and write the words that I was writing, just going into my spirit, into my place of wanting to create and really uplift. And then when I heard Lenny's voice on this song I said, "Wait, just a week ago, week and a half ago I didn't even have this song, and now I got Lenny Kravitz on this song. Wait, what's going on."

(Jazz guitar intro)

Common: The intro that Sharkey played is a minute and 20 seconds, somewhere in that range, and it was no way that we wanted to edit his intro. Like the spirit of this music is about those moments where music is being channeled through you, and you're letting God speak through you and through your instrument. I think ultimately from the intro even to the way we end it - in between you feel the riot and the energy and the struggle of it, but by the way it begins and the way it ends, you feel the peace, so you know that like even with the riot going on in your mind, that the peace is still there to be expressed. As much as the riot is going on in my mind, I kind of overcome that riot. I'm just acknowledging that it's there and I can overcome it with peace. That's what I want for this music. That's what I want for this project and that's what I always want my music to be.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "A Riot In My Mind," by Common, in its entirety.

("A Riot In My Mind" by COMMON)

Hrishikesh: For more, visit songexploder.net/common, where you'll find links to buy or stream "A Riot In My Mind," and you'll find all the past episodes of the show. Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. This is the last episode of the year, the seventh year of the podcast. And it's also the last episode for producer Christian Koons, who started working on Song Exploder in 2015. He became a vital part of the podcast, especially in the last two years while I've also been trying to make the Song Exploder Netflix show. You can find Christian and follow him on Twitter @xtiansk I can't thank him enough. And thanks to you for listening to the podcast, whether this is your first episode or if you've been listening for all seven years. Thank you so much. I'll be back in January with more episodes, to start year eight of the podcast. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, fiercely 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. They make a great gift. You can also follow the

show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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