

Song Exploder
girl in red - Serotonin
Episode 208

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.

Before this episode starts, I want to let you know that there is some frank discussion of mental health issues, including panic attacks, medical fears and thoughts of self-harm. There's also some explicit language.

("Serotonin" by GIRL IN RED)

Hrishikesh: Marie Ulven is a singer, songwriter, and producer from Norway, who makes music under the name, girl in red. She just released her debut album in April 2021, but she's already got a lot of fans and she's gotten a lot of critical acclaim from two EPs and singles that she's released online, including a couple of songs that went gold. *The New York Times* included her work in their best songs of the year in both 2018 and 2019. Last year she was nominated for Best Newcomer at the Norwegian Grammys, and this year she won their award International Success of the Year. "Do you listen to girl in red?" has also become code on TikTok, a sort of shibboleth, to ask if someone's a lesbian. In this episode, Marie breaks down the song "Serotonin," a song that started as a video she posted to her own TikTok in the early days of lockdown in 2020. You'll hear the original version she recorded on her own, before she started working with producer Matias T llez, and later, with Grammy-winning artist and producer Finneas O'Connell, who helped finish the song.

Marie: My name is Marie and I am the artist behind girl in red.

(Music fades out)

Marie: My mom's house is in Horton, in Norway, which is a very small town, like an hour outside of Oslo. That's where I grew up, that's where I learned everything when it comes to music and yeah, that's where I became who I am. So it was the beginning of quarantine and I had gone back home to my mom because I was really mentally ill and I was completely dysfunctional. So I had to stay there. I was going through some really weird stuff. I thought I was going to die, whether it was from like blood clots or like heart attacks, just like all these like weird health issues. Because I just had a feeling of illness. I really believed those feelings of illness to be real. And it was just really hard being home also

because I was suddenly leaving my everyday life. And also the world was ending, it felt like at least to me. I don't know, it was a lot of things changing very fast. I think I had started therapy in January or something of 2020. And I found out I have OCD, which made a lot of sense. But then I could no longer meet my therapist. So we ended up doing Skype calls, which weren't really working for me. And then calling on the phone and I was like, I can't even see you. And I don't feel like you understand what I'm going through right now. I remember starting, thinking of the song, because I had just talked to my therapist and I'm pretty sure that's when I realized I don't want to talk to my therapist anymore. I was in my room and then I started filming a TikTok, messing around in Logic, like I always do. And the first thing I wrote was the intro.

(Intro electric guitar riff)

Marie: And then I remember I recorded this really cool guitar thing.

(Intro guitar chords along with guitar riff)

(Beat with the same harmonic progression)

Marie: And then I was like sporadically filming some parts and then ended up just being this little TikTok thing that, you know, didn't really take over the world, but it was just a beat at that time really.

(Beat ends)

Marie: TikTok videos are fun to make, not necessarily like the editing part. But I think it's more of like the activity of just staying busy with something is good. Especially when you're in a really bad place, it's good to kind of be a little bit distracted, when it's very easy to spiral into your own mind. I have actually never had a TikTok turn into a song before. But after I made that TikTok, I just felt like there was something there. I was excited about the guitar. I was excited about this bass and I was just excited about the beat and I started singing like

(First chorus vocals: "I'm running low on serotonin / Chemical imbalance got me twisting things / Stabilize with medicine / There's no depth to these feelings")

Marie: I feel like I learned about like serotonin in like pop culture. I also actually talked to my step-mom. And she just told me serotonin is this thing that levels your mood and your emotions.

(Bass stem)

Marie: Your brain is just like this science project really. And we're all kind of our own testing rabbit to our own brain, this science project running by itself.

(First chorus vocals along with bass: "Dig deep, can't hide / From the corners of my mind / I'm terrified of what's inside")

Marie: And then I was like, I don't know what to do anymore. I'm going to take this to the studio.

(Bass ends)

Marie: Creating an album all by yourself is a very daunting task. I knew I couldn't do it all by myself. But it was really important for me to feel like I have full creative control and to not sit in the back of the studio and watch someone do something without me saying anything. But I also don't think it would be as fun to do it all by myself. So my A&R person, his name is Will, he texted me and suggested that Matias Téllez, this guy in Bergen, was the right guy for me. Really in the beginning of the studio version of "Serotonin," I started getting like all these, like rap ideas, like faster lyricism. We did that together and made this like darker universe in this rap part.

(Voice memo of Marie singing melodies over the beat)

Marie: So this is me singing over the audio from the computer, creating voice memos.

(Voice memo ends)

Marie: I was in a total different headspace at that time. I was about to get a dog and it was summer. I was feeling a lot more hopeful. But reflecting what had happened earlier that year, I fell into lyrics that were a lot darker than maybe I had anticipated.

(First verse vocals: "I get intrusive thoughts like cutting my hands off / Like jumping in front of a bus / Like how do I make this stop / When it feels like my therapist hates me? / Please don't let me go crazy / Put me in a field with daisies / Might not work, but I'll take a maybe")

Marie: When I think back, and I hear those lyrics, especially hearing me perform them without anything playing in the back. It's like, whoa, just like girl! But, also I find it a lot easier to write about things that have been very hard when they're not that hard anymore, especially about like intrusive thoughts. In therapy, I learned that having intrusive thoughts does not mean that you actually want to do them. It's just a thought and a thought is just a thought and you don't have to do anything about it. So, so when I realized that, I was like, oh shit, finally, I'm able to say this stuff in a song because the weight of it was kind of lifted.

(First verse rap vocals: "Oh, been breaking daily / But only me can save me / So I'm capitulating, crying like a fucking baby")

Marie: That was the first take. And I was like, I will never be able to replicate this take. It's not even perfectly sung, but like, the energy is perfect. And after we made that, the song started clearing up a lot more.

(Beat with layered percussion)

Marie: And we added a lot of weird percussions, like we added like a bus crashing.

(Bus crashing)

Marie: And then together we really found the very euphoric chorus.

(Full chorus)

Marie: We started out with a four on the floor beat

(Four on the floor)

Marie: Like, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun and I was like, no, no! I don't want a four on the floor beat. So we added those

(Added triplets to the kick drum rhythm)

Marie: to sort of make it less four on the floor, like a running kind of beat instead.

(Full chorus: "I'm terrified of what's inside")

Marie: But then it took me a while to get the second rap part because the first rap part leans so heavily on the lyrics and it leans so heavily on the rhythmic parts. It was hard to get meaningful lyrics in the exact same rhythm on the second part.

(Second verse vocals: "I get intrusive thoughts / Like burning my hair off / Like hurting somebody I love / Like, does it ever really stop? / When there's control, I lose it / Incredibly impulsive / So scared I'm gonna end up doing something stupid")

Marie: And then, I totally lost track of it. We both lost track of it. We ended up making like 13 versions of that song. For a long time, we were really lost on the entirety of like "Serotonin." I felt like I needed just like a fresh set of ears that could just be like, "oh wait, let me try some shit." And then we sent it to Finneas O'Connell and then he added some more percussion in the rap parts.

(Finneas beat)

Marie: Yeah and he added this really cool synth.

(Distorted synth)

Marie: That gave it a lot more energy. That made it so much cooler, like Finneas really cleared the path to the DNA that I had initially felt when I made that TikTok.

(First verse: "Oh, been breaking daily / But only me can save me / So I'm capitulating, crying like a fucking baby / I don't wanna miss it, ba-da / I don't wanna be sick, ah-da / I don't, la-ba-deh-deh-ba-deh / Da-da-da-brah-la-da-da")

Marie: The mumbling part is just full on rambling because I had not written lyrics yet and I was in the booth and that was all I could get out. And then I sent that to Finneas and he said, "What if you keep that rambling in there?" Like I thought it was really funny and I was like, "Oh!" I immediately liked that idea because it was so strange and so weird. And like I don't know, it was kind of fun and the song is so dark, but also being able to have fun in the midst of it all. It's like the way I cope with my mental health now is like laugh about certain things. So keeping that random rambling part in a song that feels so innately, like serious, I just thought it was, it was a good move.

(Rambling)

Marie: And then it has this gigantic outro.

(Timpani hits)

Marie: That was a timpani and I've been using a lot of timpani lately. Me and Matias said that the timpanis are like the old fashioned sub hit before we started like using like 808s, and that's kind of what we were going for. And then I made this guitar thing that plays the lead melody there.

(Guitar sound playing lead melody)

Marie: I dubbed that with a bunch of vocals and then Finneas dubbed my vocals with even lower vocals and it just became this like big release.

(Layered dubbed vocals along with timpani)

Marie: Listening to the outro in the context of the album is incredibly moving to me because it's just this song with so many emotions that like in the end, like I couldn't even put anything else in there and it just feels like this release. And kind of like, I don't know, coming to terms with everything that goes on in my head.

(Recording of Marie speaking in Norwegian)

Marie: I was at an ER, talking to a doctor.

(Recording continues)

Marie: That's like an audio clip, my friend recorded.

(Recording continues further)

Marie: I'm saying, "can you feel it in your body, if you get a blood clot in your head or something." It felt like my heart stopped beating and that my body got really heavy. I had just had a major panic attack at a hotel in Bergen while making the album and um - hold on, I'm just gonna tell my dog to go to bed, *(speaks Norwegian)* OK, there she goes - yeah, so I had just had like a major panic attack and I decided to put it in the outro, because it felt like okay, here's a song where I've sort of like been really honest and I've also maybe added a little few bits and pieces to make it all sound okay and good. And here at the end is like the reality. At the end of the day, I need to live with all of this shit every single

day. Like I did get something out of talking to my therapist for four months, like I did learn a lot about myself. And I also learned a lot about mental health. And I think that's how I was able to go from "I can't go through a day without thinking I'm gonna die" to be able to sing about it and rap about it. And now if I ever get a weird thought like that, I am able to just let go of it and then fall asleep. Definitely think I need to get a new therapist, even though I don't think I'm gonna die every day, the mental health, it just moves around. If it's good, then it finds somewhere else to eat you alive.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Serotonin," by girl in red, in its entirety.

("Serotonin" by GIRL IN RED)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Serotonin," and you can watch the music video. You can also watch Marie's original TikTok, where the song first began.

This episode was made by me, with editing help from Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Special thanks to Finneas and Teeny Lieberman.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.