

**Song Exploder**  
**HAIM - Summer Girl**  
**Episode 201**

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.

*("Summer Girl" by HAIM)*

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. HAIM is a band from Los Angeles, made up of the sisters Danielle, Este, and Alana Haim. They've released three albums, and they've been nominated for three Grammys. Over the years, they've worked extensively with Grammy-winning producer Ariel Rechtshaid. He and Danielle are also a couple - and I only mention that because it's relevant to the story you're about to hear. I spoke to Danielle and Ariel about the making of the song "Summer Girl" from HAIM's third album, *Women in Music Pt. III*. In this episode, they break down the song, along with Este Haim and the song's co-producer and co-writer Rostam.

Danielle: My name is Danielle Haim.

Ariel: My name is Ariel Rechtshaid.

*(Music fades out)*

Danielle: I'll never forget, I had heard a Cass McCombs song that I loved called "County Line," and I remember like looking up, "who did this album? Who produced this? Like this is awesome." And I saw this name, Ariel Rechtshaid. So then I think like a couple weeks later, I heard the Usher song, "Climax." I looked it up and, "oh my gosh, there's that name again, Ariel Rechtshaid. Wait, he did Cass McCombs and then he did an Usher song?" So I remember telling my manager like, "hey, I wanna meet with this guy," and that's how we met in 2012.

Ariel: We had a chemistry and did a few songs, and at one point I was in London mixing a record, and HAIM happened to be camped out there doing press and we sort of reconnected for the first time in a while. I don't know if it was just a moment in time where like two Valley kids trapped in London, you know like that's kind of when it started to be like, "Hmm." And it was a slow build after that, but that was I think when Danielle and I like suddenly had this connection.

And so we had just kind of moved in together and then suddenly I got this scary news.

Danielle: While we were making our second album, *Something to Tell You*, we got the news that Ariel was diagnosed with cancer and it was right when we were kind of starting the album, and it was very hard.

Ariel: You know I was like, "Of course you guys should do this without me. Let me deal with this and I'll see you later." You know and that didn't even register. They're just like, "What do you need? We're here," you know, like by my side the whole time.

Danielle: I think we were just trying to get through, sorry, let me just get my shit together.

Ariel: I don't know if there are words for how supportive Danielle and her sisters were.

Danielle: Obviously, I just felt like I wanted to be there for Ariel, and nothing about our second album was about what was going on because it was happening at the same time, and I don't think I could process it.

Ariel: Yeah, we essentially like limped through the making of *Something to Tell You*. I mean we worked as hard as we could but it was a lot of hurdles, you know. That was really like an intense period and then we got through it.

*(Synth pad)*

Danielle: I think it was the summer of 2018 and we had just come off of doing this like amazing sold out tour of the UK and Europe. And at this point, Ariel, he was on the road to recovery and it was looking positive.

Ariel: I was very, very, very lucky, very fortunate. We were starting to like believe and accept the fact that it was just like, we're good.

Danielle: The idea of that era being over, it was like, "I can finally take a breath" and that summer we took a little vacation. I finally felt like I could process what was going on the last couple of years.

*(Synth pad fades out)*

Danielle: I started thinking about this song that summer. For some reason, I just always think about drums when I'm thinking about how a song's gonna even start. Me and my two sisters were drummers first. Our dad all taught us drums when we were like three. I just remember on this vacation, being like, I wanna use this drum pattern that I've never used [laughter]. I know, this is like so specific, but it's kind of a pattern that when you go to Guitar Center and a kid sits on the drums, it's the first pattern that they play. It's

*(Danielle beatboxes a beat)*

Danielle: So I remember realizing that I also had GarageBand on my phone on this vacation because I didn't have anything with me, and I was like, "Oh, I can do something on my phone, amazing." Let me try and like program this drum beat.

*(GarageBand drums)*

Danielle: And then I came up with this line, do-do-do-do that was like super swingy.

*(GarageBand bassline plays as Danielle vocalizes bassline)*

Danielle: All of a sudden, like with the straight drum part and this cool like bassline,

*(GarageBand bass and drums together)*

Danielle: I was like, "Wow. This is like cool. This is a cool vibe."

*(GarageBand bass and drums end)*

Danielle: And I just started kind of, I put like a bunch of reverb on my vocal and I just started like mumbling a melody that I had over the drums and the bass.

*(GarageBand bass and drums along with mumbled vocals)*

Danielle: And I ended up writing a lot on my phone that summer. But for some reason, like that idea, every couple weeks, I'd just be like, "Oh, yeah. I should like listen to that thing again." Whatever that thing was. Every time I'd think about it, I would think like, "Okay. What is it?"

*(GarageBand rhythm track ends)*

Danielle: What I thought the song should be about started to form 'cause there's this part that I wrote that was like da-da-da-da, like the chorus was just this melody. You know and I was like "I'm your somethin'..." You know, fuzzy girl or like I just thought like I wanted to be Ariel's kind of light in that gnarly time. And then after that vacation, just kept thinking about these little sketches that I wrote on GarageBand and I was like, "I need to really just sit down and start writing." So I brought this idea to my sisters.

Este: My name is Este Haim and the thing that struck me as the bass player was the bassline. I was like...this is sick. And then Danielle kind of started opening up about what she wanted to write the song about. And then I was like, "wow! Okay. I mean, if you're willing to open up about this, I will go on this journey with you." I remember her talking about this feeling of being on the road and really wanting to kind of be this ray of sunshine for Ariel when he was feeling down. And I thought that that was exactly what she was doing on tour. We're such a close knit group of people. We love Ariel more than anything. We love him and he's like a brother to me. And honestly like the words really just kind of poured out.

*(First verse lead vocals: "LA on my mind, I can't breathe / You're there when I close my eyes, so hard to reach")*

Danielle: I mean "L.A. on my mind, I can't breathe" was kind of the idea, you know, when we first got the news, we were on tour. So this idea that he was dealing with this by himself at home was heartbreaking, and I felt guilty that I wasn't there. It was a lot of emotions. So the idea - sorry - the idea that he was here alone and you know I'd have a couple minutes to talk to him you know between soundcheck and the show and just kind of be positive and be kind of a light 'cause I know he was going through it at home.

*(First verse lead vocals: "Your smiles turn into cryin', it's the same release / And you always know, and you always know")*

Danielle: Just thinking about that and that dynamic, that's what I envisioned because I had this idea of, "I'm your something girl." And so at that point, I was like, okay. I don't know...maybe I should take this to Rostam and see if he's as excited as I am about it.

Rostam: I'm Rostam. I'm one of the producers of "Summer Girl" and I also helped write it.

Danielle: We worked a little bit with Rostam on our second album, and he's such a close friend and I'm such a huge fan of his. And I said, "I have this thing. I don't know. I think there's something to it."

*(Bass plays)*

Rostam: You know oftentimes it's my job to hear that it could be a song and I definitely did think it could be a song.

*(Drums join bass)*

Danielle: So yeah when I showed it to Rostam I was like, "Okay, so it's a really simple melody but there's like this part that's like di-di-di, like a du-du-du part. Kind of like "Walk on the Wild Side" or something. He's like, "Okay, play it for me."

*(Drums and bass along with the doo-doo-doo vocals)*

Danielle: I can see him light up. And I'm like, "Oh my gosh, maybe there is something to this song."

*(GarageBand demo ends)*

Danielle: The first thing that we did was I like recreated the demo from my phone onto Rostam's computer. So I did the drum part on his MIDI keyboard with some kind of live-ish roomy drum sound.

*(MIDI drum beat)*

Rostam: And then I turned to her, I was like, "So do you have lyrics?" She's like, "Yeah, I have lyrics."

Danielle: And then it came to the chorus part, I'm your sunny girl. And I was like, I was kind of just like, "I don't know like should it be like sunny? Or like?"

Rostam: I said, "Try changing sunny girl to summer girl." The word sunny, it conjures up these sort of like 60s, over the top, joyful sentiments. And I felt like the song was not just about over the top joy, there was complexity there and I felt like the word summer could embody more of that complexity.

*(Lead vocal chorus with drums: "I'm your summer girl / I'm your summer girl / doo-doo-doo")*

Rostam: As soon as we started working on this song, we were already referencing Lou Reed.

Danielle: Like “take a walk on the wild side,” it should have that kind of vibe.

*(Doo-doo-doo vocals continue)*

*(Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” doo-doo-doo vocals come in)*

Rostam: So one of the things that makes “Walk on the Wild Side” so unique is the fact that it has two bass lines.

*(“Walk on the Wild Side” bass parts)*

Rostam: It has an electric bass part and it has a sliding upright bass part.

Danielle: And then he came up with the idea of having like two basses, like that song, over the GarageBand bass that I had put in, in the demo.

*(Drums along with two basses and percussion)*

Rostam: And I thought that was something so specific and unique that we were clearly referencing this. This was like a love letter to “Walk on the Wild Side,” and when that kind of mentality took hold, I felt like everything started moving faster in terms of the recording and the production of the song.

*(Rhythm section ends)*

Rostam: There is a sax line at the end of “Walk on the Wild Side.”

Danielle: So he like got up like a sax sound on his computer.

*(MIDI sax)*

Rostam: It sort of sounds like a saxophone, it kind of sounds like sort of stiff and robotic and a little bit eerie, in a bad way.

*(MIDI sax plays again)*

Danielle: And he was like I hear this part like “I can feel the angels” and he just kind of sang this -

*(Rostam sings: “I can see the angels coming down”)*

Danielle: And I was like “wait I love that, I love that, let’s put that in the end.”

Rostam: In my head I was like, “That’s such a Bono line.” Like I could just picture Bono. I was like, maybe we should ask him if he would sing that section of the song. And Danielle was kind of like, “Well, you know I know him.” And I was like, “What?!” And she was like, “Well, when I lost my voice in Ireland, he sent me this care package. It was the sweetest thing. And he recommended a doctor.”

Danielle: So I have his number [laughter] and Rostam is like “You gotta text Bono.” And I was like, “What the fuck are you talking about? I’m gonna text Bono?!” He’s like, “Yeah I hear him.” And I think we got super drunk and he finally convinced me, he’s like, “just send it.” And I was like, “Ahh, okay!” So I sent Bono the song. He was so nice, he was like, “this is great.” He was like, “let me see where I fit in.” And I was just like, my mind was like exploding and finally he emailed or texted me back and he was like, “you know what, I’m like so sick. I’m so sorry like unless you want, like a blow horn like on the song. Like my voice is just so shot, you know I don’t think I can come up with anything in time.” And that was that.

*(Outro stacked vocals: “And I can see the angels coming down / Like a wave that’s crashing on the ground / And I can see the angels coming down”)*

Rostam: We got to the point where we had a version of it that you know had sax, drums, bass sketched in, not the final versions of those things, ‘cause the next thing was that we went to this studio called Vox that I love working at, and we all love working at.

Danielle: Este recorded her stand up bass part.

*(Upright bass)*

Este: I’m not an upright player by any means, but I think in my mind I was like, it’s literally a slide and like two notes. I should be able to do this. I’m six feet. I’m a tall girl. But I had the two engineers holding the bass for me while I played the notes ‘cause I kept falling over ‘cause the bass was too heavy for me. But I did it.

Danielle: Rostam knew this kid, Henry Solomon, who plays sax and invited him over to play the line, so it wasn't just MIDI.

*(Sax plays with upright bass)*

Este: I think Henry Solomon brought such joy to the song,

*(Sax along with drums and upright bass)*

Danielle: That's me playing drums. Yeah. I play drums on all the HAIM records.

Ariel: Danielle's inviting and open and wants people to come in and play on stuff. But the one thing that she's always doing is playing the drums.

Este: Hearing Danielle play is always fun for me, because I think she's so good. I think that's probably my favorite part of the song, is just how good the drums sound because of her playing.

*(Drums fade out)*

Rostam: At that point, Ariel hadn't worked on the song yet.

Ariel: And I was like, what is it about?

Danielle: It felt so personal to our story that I wasn't ready to be like, "And this is about you." You know?

Ariel: I think actually now that I think about it, it was Rostam, he was just like, "It's about you." And I was like, what? And so then I took a real hard look at it and I'm like, well, this is such a like intense thing. If I'm the listener, or if I'm me, I want to hear more about what you're talking about.

Danielle: I remember Ariel being like, there's something missing, there's really something missing here. Let's try and figure it out.

Ariel: Part of the experience of what that song was about was me kinda being like freaked out in bed and being like, "Oh my God what is going on?" And Danielle snapping me out of it, "You're gonna be fine. We're gonna go to this thing. We're gonna deal with it." So I was like, I just want some of that commanding energy. I



want you to like just start talking with a bit more command than the energy of the rest of the song. Suddenly, our homie Paul Thomas Anderson heard the song, and he was like, “We could do a video for this!”

Hrishikesh: In addition to being an 8-time Oscar-nominated director and screenwriter, Paul Thomas Anderson has directed six music videos for HAIM.

Este: And we were like, “Wait. Wait. Wait. Pump the brakes. We haven't even finished the song.” And he was like, “Who gives a shit. Let's do a video for it.” And, you know, Paul Thomas Anderson says “jump,” you say “how high?”

Danielle: We're such big fans of him and to collaborate with someone like that is unbelievable. It's very strange to even talk about it.

Danielle: So we were like, “let's do it.” Paul was saying like, “I think there should be a part where she's just looking at the camera and speaking.”

Ariel: And I'm like, “Hey man, I'm thinking we're gonna add this bridge where Danielle's talking to me.” And then he sent unused dialogue from some like stuff he'd written in the past, “See if any of this inspires you.”

Danielle: So we had these pages of this dialogue and we kind of just like picked out certain words and it's weird how the words on the page fit the song.

Ariel: I remember reading like, “an earthquake drill.” You know, I was like thinking about like how this is like a first run through some of life's challenges and that's what it feels like, an earthquake drill.

*(Bridge vocals: “I need you to understand / These are the earthquake drills that we ran / Under the freeway overpasses / The tears behind your dark sunglasses / The fears inside your heart's deepest gashes”)*

Ariel: And you know I was thinking about how Danielle was like by my side and lifting me up. And there was like another line about, “walk beside me.”

*(Bridge vocals with upright bass: “Walk beside me / Not behind me”)*

Ariel: I sent it to Paul and he was like, “that's great!” I'm like, “well you want writing credit?” He's like, “no, I didn't write that, you completely recontextualized it.”

*(Bridge vocals as upright bass fades: “Feel my unconditional love / do-do-do-do”)*

*(Synth pad)*

Danielle: I still, I love the song. It represents a really important part of the last couple years.

Ariel: Yeah, and also we hadn't really had a chance to stop and talk about it. We're definitely not like the most communicative about our sensitive feelings. There's just like all these things happening at once and we were just trying to survive it.

Danielle: It was traumatic. On a deep level, I'm probably still dealing with a lot of those emotions. I have a therapist now, I'm working on myself, but I do feel like this song in itself was a healing process and I also think sitting with my boyfriend talking about it, maybe has some added emotions in there. But yeah I think, I think I'm still processing it all.

*(Music fades)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Summer Girl,” by HAIM, in its entirety.

*(“Summer Girl” by HAIM)*

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit [songexploder.net/haim](http://songexploder.net/haim). You'll find links to buy or stream “Summer Girl,” and you can watch the music video that Paul Thomas Anderson directed.

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal. Thanks to Matt DiMona for his help with the interview recordings. Carlos Lerma makes illustrations for each episode, which you can find on the Song Exploder website and instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). If you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). You can also follow the show on Twitter and Instagram @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

