

Song Exploder
Iggy Pop - American Valhalla
Episode 68

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("American Valhalla" by IGGY POP)

Hrishikesh: Iggy Pop is a pioneer of punk rock, whose legendary career began over 50 years ago. In 2015, he began collaborating on music with Joshua Homme, of Queens of the Stone Age. The result was Iggy Pop's 23rd album, *Post Pop Depression*. In this episode, Iggy and Josh break down the song "American Valhalla," and tell the story of how it was shaped by reverb, opera, and the military. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

("American Valhalla" by IGGY POP)

Iggy: Hey, hello, I'm Iggy Pop.

(Music fades)

Joshua: Hello, my name is Joshua Homme.

Iggy: The gestation of "American Valhalla" was as follows. Josh sent me a shitty demo labeled "shitty demo" that began with the steel drum and vibraphone motif.

Joshua: And the vibraphone is an instrument that's plugged in. So it goes, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, but I didn't turn it on. It's just played off.

(Vibraphone)

(Steel drum)

(Steel drum ends)

Iggy: That steel drum. That's really, really unusual melody.

Joshua: The kind of primitive, trance-y, underbelly of the song.

Iggy: And he sent me a text afterwards, positing that Valhalla was the most valid and superior paradise for warriors, compared to the ones from other cultures because you had to actually do something really brave, and, to get in there. And I texted him back saying, "Well, this raises the question: is there an American Valhalla? Where is it? What is it?" After that exchange, I spent a day singing in my car, sitting in my car in the carport, singing to it, and coming up with words.

(Vocals: "I've shot my gun, I've used my knife / This hasn't been an easy life / I'm hoping for American Valhalla / But if I have outlived my use / Please drink my juice")

Joshua: That notion of, if I've outlived my use, please take what's left of me,

Iggy: Exactly.

Joshua: is so heartbreaking and wonderful, and it's a tear jerker.

(Drums)

Joshua: Iggy is 68, and that perspective in rock and roll is not represented, but I also think it resonates at 18 years old, 28 years old, 38 years old because of its honesty and vulnerability.

(Drums fade)

Joshua: I love the lyrical bent of this because it, it is vulnerable. It starts by saying, "I'm completely stripped. I'm not going to bring anything with me. I'm just curious about, is it there? And can I, you know, who do I have to kill [laughter] to get in?" You know?

(Vocals: "Is anybody in there? / Who do I have to kill?")

Joshua: We both agreed to sort of ignore chasing down rock music.

Iggy: Yeah.

Joshua: And we sort of articulated that the heaviness would come from content and the delivery instead of distortion and easy, what I would call, cheap tricks.

Iggy: Fallbacks.

Joshua: So the words for this, really, they hit me so hard. Whenever we were working on melodies, I always would pick up my hand and look toward the sky because I was using this reference of Bugs Bunny [laughter].

("Kill the Wabbit" by ELMER FUDD ft. BUGS BUNNY)

Joshua: with Elmer Fudd

Iggy: Yeah, yeah.

Joshua: doing Wagner, [sung] "kill the rabbit."

Iggy: Yeah [laughter].

("Kill the Wabbit" by ELMER FUDD ft. BUGS BUNNY)

(Music ends)

Joshua: You have this, I don't know what to call that, but

Iggy: Opera.

Joshua: Yeah, this operatic drama, this, this look to the stars

Iggy: Yeah, yeah.

Joshua: and a reach with your hand. And this had that, [sung] "Where is."

(Vocals: "Where is American Valhalla?")

Joshua: That moment, it's put in reverb. So when you

Iggy: Yeah I know, it's bathed.

Joshua: get to that moment, it's bathed.

(Vocals with reverb: "Where is American Valhalla")

Joshua: And as you go, as you're saying, [sung] "Is there anybody in there?"

(Vocals with reverb: "Is anybody in there? / Who do I have to kill?")

Joshua: I'm pulling the reverb back, so it's coming back into candlelight.

(Vocals: "I'm not the man with everything / I've nothing, but my name")

Joshua: If you listen to that, you know, it's at, standing at the precipice going, "Where is it?" And as it gets more human and asks questions like, "Shit, how do I get in there?" The reverb goes away and it gets tight again.

(Piano)

Iggy: The character in "American Valhalla" is the same guy all the way through the album. He is a veteran, he's over 40, he's been through a great experience in his life. He's seen real action and drama, but it has left him stripped of any specific identity or any home. He wants to be morally correct, but he is unable to be so, and unable to decide, "What are the correct ethics?"

Joshua: Growing up near the military base at 29 Palms, I always was witness to an influx of young, inspired, hopeful people that traditionally, in this last couple generations, joining the military is a way to leave your small town when you have no opportunity to do so in another manner. And so, you leave with the hope that they'll pay for college. And next thing you know, you're being fired upon for a reason that is nebulous and could not be known.

(Piano)

(Piano fades)

Iggy: He emphasized a line. I was singing, "I'm not the man with everything, I've nothing, but my name." And so, he said, "I want you to say that naked at the end of the track," you know.

(Piano, steel drum, guitar, bass, and drums)

(Vocals join: "I've nothing, but my name")

(Music ends)

(Vocals: I've nothing, but my name / I've nothing, but my name")

(Shuffling sound)

Iggy: What, is there a sound?

Joshua: Yeah, it's you getting up.

Iggy: Oh my God.

Joshua: And, and

Iggy: You documented [laughter].

Joshua: The world exists from friction.

Iggy: Yeah.

Joshua: It's taking that noise at the end of a song and maybe elevating it, but it's these elements of rawness that translate the best.

(Vocals: "I've nothing, but my name / I've nothing, but my name")

Joshua: It feels to me like when it ends, that reason to have you repeat that is that it doesn't resolve where you make it to Valhalla. It's just like, "I'm at the gate, and I have nothing, but my name." You know, it never actually crosses that threshold. It's the seconds before. And in the way, there's a bittersweetness there of, like, we never know if you make it or not. Valhalla, the requirement is that you would not turn and run. Now, life to me is about the amount of fears you've faced, not conquered, just faced.

Iggy: To me, it means you do something good to get in there [laughter]. And then, once you get in, what you would hope for, is to have some peace.

(Guitar)

Iggy: Before I called Josh, I felt stifled, and I thought I have to do something, but I'm going to need help. But before I look for help, I've got to look into myself and see what I've got.

(Guitar)

Iggy: I didn't notice it, it kind of crept up on me. Some other people have mentioned it that the whole thing sounds valedictory, and that is pretty accurate with me. I told Josh when we were three quarters into this, that it was obviously going to be an album. I said, you know, this is going to be my last one because I feel it's, I can find more pleasure in witnessing things and being in a situation, like I like a nice sky. I like pretty clouds. I like to look at a beautiful site. I like to bear witness more and more and less and less be involved in, "Yeah, I'm getting this and I'm," you know, so those are the things to me that go with the idea of a paradise.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "American Valhalla," by Iggy Pop, in its entirety.

("American Valhalla" by IGGY POP)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Iggy Pop, including a link to buy this song. Next time on Song Exploder, Thao & The Get Down Stay Down.

("Astonished Man" by THAO & THE GET DOWN STAY DOWN)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Editing and transcription help on this episode by Christian Koons, and Kathleen Smith handled clearance. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Astonished Man" by THAO & THE GET DOWN STAY DOWN)

(Music ends)