

Song Exploder
Janelle Monáe - So Afraid
Episode 146

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.

("So Afraid" by JANELLE MONÁE)

Hrishikesh: Janelle Monáe is an award-winning musician and actress who released her first record in 2007. She's been nominated for multiple Grammys and she starred in the Oscar films *Moonlight* and *Hidden Figures*. In April 2018, she released her third album, *Dirty Computer*, which includes this song "So Afraid." In this episode, Janelle Monáe takes "So Afraid" apart to explain how she built it, step by step - beginning with a trip to the dentist.

("So Afraid" by JANELLE MONÁE)

Janelle: This is Janelle Monáe.

(Music fades)

Janelle: It was October 13th, 2015. I had a toothache and I was on the way to the dentist. I had just finished working on a song. And I was in a very introspective mood at the time, asking myself questions around my fears, around my anxieties. And what does it feel like to be afraid of many things, to be afraid of loving myself, to be afraid of forgiving those who have hurt me? Being afraid of falling in love, being vulnerable. But I was dealing with a toothache and it was kicking my ass. And so, I had made an appointment. And so I took Advil, got in my car, and I'm riding on the highway and that is when I had the idea for "So Afraid." "Okay, talk about all the things that you're afraid of in this very moment." And whenever I have an idea, I'll pull out my phone and I'll press the voice memo.

(Voice memo: "I'm afraid that you won't love me / I'm afraid you'll judge me so / I'm afraid that you'll look at me not like the hero / I'm afraid that you'll tell my family that I'm not who I am / I'm afraid that I can never ever be on Instagram")

(Voice memo ends)

Janelle: [laughter] I was like, “Okay, let's get it out. Let's get it out. Let's get it out. What are you afraid of? What are these things that have been holding you back, giving you anxiety? Let's just talk about that.”

(Voice memo: “Freely loving who I love / What I stand for / I don't really know who I am anymore / What has ... done to me / Why are we in love / I'm just so afraid / I'm afraid of everything”)

(Voice memo ends)

Janelle: I deal with anxiety, just like a lot of people do. And being so afraid meant at that time me measuring myself up against the accomplishments of everybody else, you know, as the rest of the world is moving forward and being successful, and me making mistakes and forgiving myself for those mistakes. All those things can be very difficult. And they still are difficult for me to process.

(Voice memo: “I'm so afraid (ahhhh) / I'm so afraid (ohhhh)”)

(Voice memo ends)

Janelle: What I ended up doing was getting back to the studio, and playing it for Nate Wonder, who is my music collaborator, and telling him exactly how I wanted the song to go.

(Guitar)

Janelle: So right now, you hear Nate Wonder playing the guitar. That's what I wanted to start off with first. Whenever I'm building a song, I like to start with guitar or piano. Because I think that great songs are able to be played with just the minimal instrumentation and it still resonate with you. And I wanted it to really be about my voice.

(Vocals with guitar)

(Guitar)

Janelle: It wasn't about the lyrics then, it was about what was the delivery going to be, in terms of the vocal. What was that style going to be? What was the tone going to be? I wanted you to hear in the verses this person in just a state of anxiety, of

fear. And you could hear it in her voice, you could hear it in the way that she's singing.

(Vocals join)

(Guitar)

Janelle: She's like almost on her last breath because everything around her is moving, but she's not moving, because she's allowed fear to just take her by the hands, and just control her mind and let her think that there's no way that she can move forward. And so that was what I focused on, was just having that guitar there to allow my voice to experiment with different ways of delivering the vocal.

(Vocals join)

(Music fades)

Janelle: I had this version of this recording for months and months. And we just always kept coming back to it. I kept trying to re-record it and as I kept recording the song, I got braver as time passed. And so, I wanted to see what happened before you found your strength and what did you look like before you found your freedom. It came out with lyrics first.

(Vocals with guitar: "All the kids run around playing free and fun, while the dogs lap around the can")

(Guitar)

Janelle: I wanted to just highlight kids in my neighborhood back in Kansas City, Kansas, running through the ghetto with not a care in the world.

(Vocals with guitar: "Falling down, climbing trees, swimming in the river, no life jacket on their backs")

(Guitar)

Janelle: I envy kids sometimes because they don't know about the world. You know, they haven't dealt with police brutality. They haven't dealt with gun violence. They're just so pure. They're running. And it's just like this moment where you

wish like, “Man, if I would have known what I knew when I was seven years old, I would have been saying thank you every single day for those days.” But then,

(Vocals with guitar: “Daughters sharpen their knives and they hunt for food, others watch their children grow”)

(Guitar)

Janelle: “Daughters sharpen their knives, and they hunt for food.” It's a metaphor for girls and women and how tough we have to be. I grew up feeling a lot more pressure as a girl like, “Don't dress this way because the boys will look at you, or you could be raped.” There was a lot of that going on. You know, I am this queer, black woman who grew up to working-class parents, who every single day is reminded by those in the position of power, that we don't care about women. It just made me a harder person. I had to have more armor because in this world that I'm growing up in, it's not always going to be safe for me. And then when I grew up, you're still dealing with that. You know, you're dealing with having to shield yourself from the sexism, and be tough enough to fight back against that emotionally.

(Music fades)

Janelle: And so, I understood that I needed to go even further with my emotions because I started to realize that there was power in vulnerability. You know, for a while, I had been just showing confidence. You know, “I'm a black woman. I need to be brave. I need to encourage other black women. I need to uplift, uplift, uplift.” But at the same time, a lot was going on with me personally. And I realized that the times that I connected most and that I was encouraged and inspired most was by the vulnerabilities of others. The way that they were able to talk about their insecurities, did something remarkable.

(Vocals: “And I'm afraid (ahhhh) / I'm so afraid”)

Janelle: There's so much power in admitting that we are afraid, afraid of loving the person that folks say you shouldn't love. Afraid of forgiving America for the things that they've done to the black and brown folks, or to the LGBTQIA community. You're just afraid to trust your country, and you're just afraid to love yourself. And so, I think that this song represents that, what it means to live in such a fearful state.

(Vocals: "I'm so afraid (ahhhh) / What if I lose?")

Janelle: You know, I engineer myself, and I also record myself. What I love most about engineering myself is that I get a chance to connect with me more. I don't have to worry about impressing anybody because honestly, you know, when you work with different engineers, maybe they think, "Oh, she's going to come in here, and things are going to be perfect." But I don't want to think about perfection, I don't want to think about an audience. And even if one person is in the room, it's still an audience. When I'm going through these initial stages of a song, and I'm exploring, I'm just private in that way that, you know, this is a private conversation that I need to have with myself.

(Vocals with synths: "What if I lose? / Is what I think to myself / I'm fine in my shell / I'm afraid of it all, afraid of loving you")

(Synths)

Janelle: One of the things that I've always wanted to do was to make timeless, futuristic music [laughter] that you can play it in the future, you can play it if you travel back.

(Synths)

Janelle: And so, the thing that I love most about this song is the synths. They bring this sense of like eeriness to the song, this sense of futurism. Classically futuristic.

(Drums)

Janelle: Nate Wonder is playing drums. I played the drums as much as I could to show him the feeling. He'll say, "Hey, you want to come over here? Like just show me. You know, it doesn't have to be perfect," because I'm always like, "You've been producing longer than me." But he's like, "No, you know, go ahead. It's a feeling. And I won't be able to capture the feeling that you have in your heart, in your mind, period. You came up with this song. This was birthed from you. You are the best person to tell me how to do it." I'm super thankful to have been working with someone who followed my lead and didn't allow themselves to get in the way of the spirit of this song, just because they may have been even more knowledgeable about how to get to the end result faster.

(Drums end)

Janelle: When we were picking sounds and when we were trying to build the song, we wanted to make sure it felt like what I was feeling inside. Like, you just can't even take it anymore. I wanted it to explode.

(Explosion)

Janelle: There are moments where I blow up [laughter], where I just have a complete meltdown. And so I wanted something to be explosive for you to finally see this person, finally see me just break. I have to release.

(Vocals, synth, bass, and drums: "Aaaah, I'm so afraid (ahhhh) / I'm so afraid (ahhhh) / What if I lose? / Is what I think to myself / I'm fine in my shell / I'm afraid of it all, afraid of loving you")

Janelle: With my backing vocals, I wanted them to feel really dreamy, I wanted them to feel like you were in my mind, like fears singing at you.

(Vocals: "I'm a gift and a curse to the wilderness when the leaves only turn to brown (ahhhh)")

Janelle: Like it just sounds like tired fears [laughter], like they're exhausted with you [laughter].

(Vocals: "in the village dens, my cousins fetch for lunch (ahhhh) / While I sit in my room writing letters to my church and things and such (ahhhh) / 'Cause I'm afraid (ahhhh) / (Ahhhh)")

Janelle: Nate's on the background vocals too.

(Vocals: "Ahhhh")

Janelle: He's in this band called Deep Cotton. They had a couple songs that I loved, and when I decided that I wanted the background vocals to be as light as they were, I felt like his vocal was perfect for this.

(Vocals with guitar)

Janelle: I felt lighter after I recorded "So Afraid." I felt like I unpacked some things. Like what it really means to love myself, and what it means to allow myself to be loved and to fall deeply in love with another person.

(Synths join)

Janelle: I think that openly talking about fears keeps us connected. I feel so much more inspired and encouraged to move forward when somebody is telling me about their imperfections, and then they come out of them. It's just like, how is a hero made? How is a leader made? How is a broken person able to become a brave person?

(Music ends)

Janelle: Vulnerability, there's so much power in it.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "So Afraid," by Janelle Monáe, in its entirety.

("So Afraid" by JANELLE MONÁE)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Janelle Monáe. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons.

Carlos Lerma made the art for this episode, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. Next time on Song Exploder, filmmaker and composer, John Carpenter breaks down his iconic theme to *Halloween*.

("Halloween (Theme)" by JOHN CARPENTER)

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. You can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/merch. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

(Music fades)