

Song Exploder
Julia Holter - Horns Surrounding Me
Episode 21

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.

("Horns Surrounding Me" by JULIA HOLTER)

Hrishikesh: Julia Holter studied composition, and in the song "Horns Surrounding Me," she arranges not only acoustic and electronic instruments, but also layers of ambient field recordings and background noise. The song was released in 2013 on her acclaimed album *Loud City Song*. In this episode, Julia deconstructs the recording, and talks about what she did to evoke a feeling of fear in both the music and the way she sang, changing her voice on different parts of the song to create character and texture.

("Horns Surrounding Me" by JULIA HOLTER)

(Music fades)

Julia: My name is Julia Holter. I wrote "Horns Surrounding Me" in 2010. It was sort of like a soft piano song that I use these lyrics that I found. It wasn't my writing, it was Pushkin.

(Vocals and piano)

Julia: We played this song that had no name, for like a year and a half, live. And it had these other lyrics, but then I decided to put my own lyrics to it, and that was what "Horns Surrounding Me" became.

("Horns Surrounding Me" by JULIA HOLTER)

Julia: This song is about being, kind of, bombarded by noise, and sound, and like needing to find one's own inner peace, I guess. So I just think of, like, the loudness of brass, and I thought that something abrasive like that was what I wanted. And I was trying to, almost imagining, like, originally my vision was like a marching band chasing; someone chasing you, and not letting you hear your own voice or something, which to me is really terrifying actually.

(Vocals: "So I recall the words of lovers sadly in the sun")

Julia: Somehow I was trying to be a man in this song [laughter]. I think I just was trying to be, like, a scared man. Like how would a scared man sing, I don't know, like

(Vocals: "Unending sun")

Julia: I don't even know how to sing like a scared woman, except I would maybe be kind of quiet. And I think I was trying to kind of be like Bryan Ferry for this song [laughter], and that was my closest comparison.

("Love Is The Drug" by BRYAN FERRY)

(Music ends)

Julia: So I guess sick, trying to evoke the fear of a man was kind of fun. So we actually staged a chase on the top of a building.

(Chase sound)

Julia: And I was just like, you know, breathing, and like doing what I needed to do for the song, and just running. I was getting really literal with that, I guess [laughter]. I just love atmosphere a lot, and cinematic, kind of, moments.

(Chase sound)

(Chase sound ends)

Julia: There's also like sort of a field recording that I did once. It's a piece in of itself of my friend running around with a recorder around my apartment building, and then me playing harmonium in my room. It's a song I made

(Field recording)

Julia: for fun, one day, that's inside of "Horns Surrounding [laughter] Me."

(Field recording)

Julia: I started making field recordings when I was in college, and I was totally confused about music, because I kind of hated everything I wrote. And I was

doing Composition as my major, so it was like, the pressure was on [laughter] to be like a good composer. And I just, like, couldn't stand anything I was doing. And I wasn't singing at all at the time or anything. And I think it was attractive to me, because I was trying to find my voice, as they say. I was interested in the environment much more than just like musical concepts. I'll frequently like record something that just seems really exciting to me, both in terms of like the sound source. Like, if it's like birds making crazy sounds, but also like the way that they're echoing in the structures, and like the spatial aspects of it.

(Field recording)

Julia: I like to have this element of noise there a lot, and that you just get noise in a field recording. And that's just the noise of a room, noise of a space. And that's why it takes forever. Like this recording session took, like, two weeks, and then, it was like months and months and months of arranging these field recordings [laughter], and like making sure it just all blends, and that takes like a long time.

(Drone)

Julia: And a lot of the song is just a drone, if you really get down to the harmonic structure. But within that, I play chords.

(Synth)

Julia: And there's that moment of a G natural.

(Synth)

Julia: And then, it's like

(Music ends)

Julia: really scary.

(Horn sound)

(Horn sound ends)

Julia: The horn part, it's a really funny combination of a trombone that was recorded in [laughter] Mexico,

(Trombone)

Julia: and [laughter] a saxophone.

(Saxophone)

Julia: this MIDI-ish sounding horn.

(Horn sound)

Julia: Yeah I have a sax sound on my Node, that's pretty great actually.

(Sax sound)

(Sax sound ends)

Julia: I ended up arranging parts for everyone to play, and we had to scale back the acoustic things I'd arranged. Like I wrote out everything, and a lot of it, we just used electronics for, in the end. I just was asking for that more than the acoustic elements, that I had kind of thought would work.

(Vocals)

Julia: It's interesting that I sing differently when I perform than when I record. When I perform live, I actually tend to really push my

(Vocals)

Julia: voice a lot.

(Vocals)

Julia: I never [laughter] thought anyone would ever hear this [laughter]. It's supposed to be embedded in the song.

(Vocals)

Julia: I couldn't get a real opera singer to come in, so I just did that. You just add reverb [laughter].

(Vocals)

(Horns)

Julia: When you play a song for a really long time live, it's really hard to record it, because recording is an opportunity to really do something magical that you can't do when performing.

(Horns)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Horns Surrounding Me," by Julia Holter, in its entirety.

("Horns Surrounding Me" by JULIA HOLTER)

Hrishikesh: For more information on Julia Holter, visit songexploder.net, where you'll find a link to buy "Horns Surrounding Me."

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