

Song Exploder
Meek Mill - Trauma
Episode 174

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Trauma" by MEEK MILL)

Thao: This episode contains explicit language. Meek Mill is a rapper from Philadelphia. He's put out five albums. His most recent, *Championships*, debuted at #1 on the charts, and was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap Album. Back in 2007, he was arrested on a gun charge at the age of 19, and over the last eleven years, he was sent to prison four times for parole violations. But in July 2019, based on evidence of alleged police corruption, the Pennsylvania Superior Court threw out his conviction, and the parole violation that had led to his most recent time in prison, a five-month sentence. It was soon after Meek Mill was released that the song, "Trauma," was created. He took inspiration from his experiences in prison, and his early life in Philadelphia. In this episode, Meek Mill and Don Cannon, who produced the track, break down how the whole thing came together.

("Trauma" by MEEK MILL)

Meek: I go by the name of Meek Mill.

(Music fades out)

Meek: When I got out of prison, I wanted to explain my mind frame, where I come from, being locked in a cell 23 hours a day, that could do something to you mentally.

Don: My name is Don Cannon. It was 2018, and you know, I had a heads up he was going to be released from jail so I want to say like, "How can I jump in with Meek and make something feel exciting, classic, and mean something to the culture? How can we make a stance?" We're both from Philadelphia so we have similar fights, similar battles.

Meek: As a kid from the age of a toddler to like ten years old, I used to love playing the game. I used to get As and Bs, and then when I start going outside on my French step, people was getting shot, they was selling drugs. Of course, I got tangled up in the life, I had to protect myself, I had to feed myself. The age of 19, I caught a case, a gun case, I was charged with a bunch of bogus charges, beat

by the police, was on probation for eleven years, sent to prison four times and along the process, I dedicated myself to making music, and I never turned back.

Don: The minute he got out, I reached out to him and, you know, he had a lot of things going on, you know, just getting out. And I just said, "Yo, I got something for you. It's going to explain everything." I started getting into the beat making process with him a long time ago. He was a youngster, but this beat was a lot more of a thinking process, more than it was actually me just sitting down, making a beat. If you watch some of Meek's earlier freestyle videos, he actually freestyled on this Mobb Deep record called "Get Away."

Meek: Mobb Deep like was rappers that inspired me. I actually rapped off that beat on my first mixtape. I burnt 50 CDs at OfficeMax and just passed them out. And you know, that's how I started to get my buzz in.

Don: It's one of his best freestyles in my opinion. So I did a little research on it. I had that in the back of my mind like, man, maybe I should try to tap into the original sample of the Mobb Deep record and it showed from, the progression from when he'd started to now. So the sample is Barclay James Harvest, "Taking Me Higher."

("Taking Me Higher" by BARCLAY JAMES HARVEST)

Don: And you know, he's always having big dreams, trying to get away from, you know, the simple hood stuff and getting to the next level. It's always having a dream. Dream Chasers is his label, he's always teaching kids to have a dream, so the song meant a lot.

(Music fades out)

Don: So when creating, I look at it as like a script. I create the storyline, I lay out the sample.

(Sample)

Don: And then I have to figure out, "How can I keep a certain bounce and aggression?" You know, sometimes when you get these tell-tale stories from artists, the beats are really downplayed because you don't want it to interfere with the message that the artist is trying to give out. So I was trying to figure out how to keep the beat and aggression going the same way.

(Beat joins sample)

Don: I just wanted to have a up tempo feel and not just a laid back feel to get his message off. And I felt like if I could pull that off, I could get him to bring the best out of his self about the story.

(Sample fades beat continues)

Don: You know, I don't know if he was ready to jump back in, but I sent it over to him and he was like, "Hold this for me. Don't play this for nobody. I got something special for it."

(Beat ends)

Don: He came to Atlanta and he called me, told me, "Pull up to the studio." He was like, "I want you to hear some records." He was halfway through the process of the first verse and he was playing it, and it was like about 15 people in there. They was like, "Yo, this one right here is exactly what he needs." And he hadn't even got to the hook yet, but I already knew once he got that content on the first verse, I was like, "Oh yeah, this is going to be special."

(First verse full track: "we all hangin' with a noose on our neck / My celly mom just died, he wanna use my collect / And he won't make it to the wake unless he give 'em a check / We still niggas though, what you expect?)

Meek: I was locked up with a guy before, I had to let him use a collect call just to contact his family after his mother died. He couldn't connect with his family, so you know. It's just like if you're in prison and your mother dies, and you don't have a certain amount of money, you can't even go, pay your respects to your mother. That could make or break you. Just that alone, knowing that amount of a dollar could stop you from seeing your mother for the last time. And you know, me seeing that, being in prison around people who are poor and me coming back and me having resources, and having money and able to support myself and my family from jail, I just had a different outlook on it. I'm like, "Damn, they won't let them go see their mothers in a casket unless you have money to pay." That was kind of unfair to me, and it never sat too well with me. I just want to give people a bird's eye view of the story I had to walk and many others had to walk that's kind of silent.

(Instrumental)

Don: I felt like “to get away” part of the sample meant a lot. Because a lot of people don't understand being locked up 23 hours of dark and one hour of light, what it does to your brain, you really just want to get away and this can mean a lot of things. It can mean leave Earth, leave just your mental thoughts.

(Instrumental continues)

Don: So you had the dreamer in the beginning, which was the intro, and then, you know, the get away was basically him getting a chance to speak on how it was inside and how he was feeling.

(Instrumental fades)

Meek: I make all my music on the spot, I don't write my music down. So you know, as soon as I get a thought, I got to rush to the booth and lay it down piece by piece.

Don: I think that's a great thing. A lot of times when you write down things, you already got it, the feeling out on paper, so now you're reading it back and you're not giving it a certain amount of feeling. It's a read back and it's very hard to give it the same energy. When it's in your brain, you're giving out the emotion as you're saying it. You know, they tell you sometimes when you're depressed or you're feeling some type of way, “Write all your thoughts down on paper, you'll feel better.” Rapping is different, you speak it into the mic, you know what I mean? You give all your emotion to people, they feel it a certain way.

Meek: You know, I'm talking about experiences from growing up in these type of environments, like a young kid being shot down and an old lady coming out who don't even know this kid. Someone that got shot on her block. And she holding him, telling him like, “Just breathe, baby. Like hang in there.”

(Second verse vocals: “Ain't no PTSDs, them drugs keep it at ease / They shot that boy 20 times when they could've told him just freeze / Could've put him in a cop car, but they let him just bleed / The ambulance, they coming baby, just breathe”)

(Breathing)

(Beat)

Don: That one in particular, was just chill-giving, it just takes me back to where I see moms run out in the middle of the street and trying to wake their baby up and they're already passing, you know what I mean. You say that line, I know exactly what you're talking about. So I gave him a platform to speak freely and the world to hear his troubles and, you know, I was happy about that. That's exactly what I was aiming for. And then I say, "Yo, how can I make this record bigger?" You know, my go-to musicians are 1500 or Nothin'. They're a band in California. They've played for, you know, Snoop Dogg, Jay Z. They're really good with taking records to the next level. So, you know, when I'm trying to get that feel, I always reach out to them to really put the icing on the cake.

(Organ)

Don: You know those guys come from the church, so they're always bringing in the best of the best. I don't even have to tell them sometimes where I'm going for. I get to say, "Yo, I need like that grunge feel, you know what I mean? Like you're walking through the neighborhood on Halloween." So they put like a small vocal chop in the back of them.

(Vocal chop along with organ)

Don: It's a ghoul-ing feeling. Like it's that mysterious, horror film feeling. And then they put live guitars in there.

(Guitars)

Don: I felt like, you know, on my journey with Meek, it was like, "Wait for the proper time and give him the canvas to paint on." And honestly, he hit it bullseye. When you sit there and you're listening to him, you feel some type of way.

(Chorus full track: "I just won / I was on the corner with the reefa / And they got us warring for our freedom / See my brother blood on the pavement / How you wake up in the mornin' feelin' evil? / Uhh, trauma")

Meek: When I say, "I seen my brother's blood on the pavement, how you wake up in the morning feeling evil," basically like seeing one of your homies, your friends, your family members shot down. If you see too much of that, you'll start waking up in the morning and feeling evil, feeling like you want to get revenge, feeling like you want to protect yourself or you might want to kill, or do anything, or

harm someone else because you're enduring so much trauma and hate. My real reason why I made this song, I always thought of it like this. I used to have to do community service with the veterans, and I used to see so many veterans, you know, they might've went to war and there are soldiers that they went to war with. Two of them, five of them might've got killed. Some of them guys have like mental issues because they seen too much and been through too much. And you know, they might have post traumatic stress. They might have paranoia and think someone trying to kill them and commit a crime. When they go in front of the court system, the first thing they bring up is "This is a veteran. He has post traumatic stress." In my neighborhood, this one kid, the last one left, all four brothers was killed. He carrying a gun in a neighborhood. And the guys that killed all four of his brothers, they probably going to kill him, too. So you know, he trying to defend himself and he get in something and catch a case. And you know, when we go in court for carrying a gun, we can't go in there and say, "Your honor, I'm paranoid. If you check the data in my neighborhood, there was 300 kids that look like me murdered this year in my neighborhood. That's why I was carrying a gun." That doesn't work for black and brown men in court. Do you think they ever even bring post traumatic stress up in the courtroom? They label you a gang member or a thug. They don't even bring it up. They don't base it off of circumstance, they don't base it off of mental health, post traumatic stress disorder, is that fair? Do ya'll see that as fair? Yeah, it ain't fair at all.

(Chorus full track: "Uhh, trauma / When them drugs got a hold of your mama / And the judge got a hold on your father / Go to school, bullet holes in the locker")

(Beat along with organ)

Meek: You might ride through the hood or the ghetto, and you might see kids on the corner and their face might be balled up and frowned up. You know, people automatically classify him, "He's a bad guy, he's dangerous." He might be dangerous, but his dad might be in a graveyard. His mom might be on drugs. He probably been to 10 funerals this year. You know, it's hard to really fix your face and fix your image and seem to be happy when you've been through these type of things, so where we come from, it's a different world.

Thao: And now, here is "Trauma," by Meek Mill, in its entirety.

("Trauma" by MEEK MILL)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Meek Mill. There's also a link to learn about Reform Alliance, the organisation he co-founded that aims to reduce the number of people serving unjust parole and probation sentences. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.

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