

Song Exploder
Michelle Branch - Best You Ever
Episode 108

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: Just a heads up, there's some explicit language in this episode.

("Best You Ever" by MICHELLE BRANCH)

Hrishikesh: Michelle Branch is a Grammy-winning singer/songwriter. She put out two platinum albums when she was still a teenager. Those records were huge hits, and so the sound on those records defined her as an artist - for better or for worse. Over a decade later, in 2017, Michelle put out her third album, *Hopeless Romantic*. In this episode, Michelle talks about why she was in musical limbo for so long, as she takes apart her song "Best You Ever."

("Best You Ever" by MICHELLE BRANCH)

Michelle: This is Michelle Branch.

(Music fades)

Michelle: I was signed at a really young age. I was 16 or 17 when I signed to Maverick. And my first album came out in 2001, and everyone's first impression of me was that.

("All You Wanted" by MICHELLE BRANCH)

Michelle: And certain people had a hard time letting go of that. I feel like a lot of people just wanted me to like make a pop record. But it started to dawn on me that I had never made an album that sounded like what I really listened to. I don't listen to a lot of pop, pop music, I'm more of a fan of rock music. And I found myself in a weird position, because I was under contract, and they wouldn't drop me, but they wouldn't release any of the music I was making. So it was really frustrating. It felt kind of like I was being [laughter] held hostage by my own record label. I was like, "Can I just please put out an album?" And they were like, "Well, this isn't pop enough [laughter], we don't know what to do with it." And it was really, really, really frustrating. And so, finally, in 2014, a new label head

came in, and he's like, "I cannot believe what you've been through, and you deserve a fresh start, and I'm going to let you go." So I finally got out of my contract with them in 2014, but it was really strange time for me because I was newly divorced. I had just separated from my husband of nearly 11 years. And my whole identity is like a 20 year old as an adult, actually, because I had spent my whole life signed there. And so, suddenly it felt as if like the rug [laughter] had been pulled out from under me. And I was like, "What is happening with my life?" The slate has been wiped clean. So that's when I started writing for this record. This song was written at a writing session with a dear friend of mine named Amy Kuney, and this writer in LA named Harlan Silverman. We went over to Harlan's house in LA, and he has this little home studio, and where this song started was me talking about how much I loved the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

("Gold Lion" by YEAH YEAH YEAHS)

Michelle: And I was talking about Karen O's voice, and how I'm just a super fan of hers.

("Gold Lion" by YEAH YEAH YEAHS)

Michelle: I was like, "Let's try to write a Yeah Yeah Yeahs song." And Harlan picked up his bass.

(Bass with drums)

Michelle: So there's the bass and a drum loop. And I was like humming stuff, and eventually humming something that became the vocal melody. And that's when we kind of stopped,

(Music ends)

Michelle: and said, "Okay, what do we want the song to be about?"

(Bass with drums)

Michelle: Amy was going through a breakup. I had just gone through a breakup. And because we know each other outside of work, like there was a comfort level there where we could really just shoot the shit about our breakups. Amy and I started talking, she said, "What if we like wrote a letter to our exes of like, 'Hey, one day, you're going to regret breaking up with me. You're going to miss all of the things that I did for you, that made your life so easy, that you took for

granted.” She was scribbling away on a piece of paper, and she just kind of like handed me this letter. It said, “Dearest lover.”

(Vocals join: “Dearest lover read this letter / I can’t pretend I’m still in love”)

Michelle: I wanted it to sound kind of like fuck you [laughter]. I wanted it to sound like I still had some like power over the situation. I actually have to say like my divorce was really, really amicable. And, you know, it just ran its course, but I do feel like there's things that come up a year after breaking up with someone, that you've been living with for so long that you're like, “Hey, you know what? I wish I would have said this.” I definitely felt like I was anticipating a lot of like, “What does this person need? What can I do to be more helpful?” And I [laughter] never fully felt thanked for that, damn it! And so, we had this like kind of weird little demo. It was unfinished, there wasn't a bridge, and it was very sparse, but the most important elements were there, which was the vocal melody and lyrics.

(Vocals, electric guitar, bass, and drums: “I want you to remember me / Every time you scream as the best you ever / Oh, I’m the best you never had”)

Michelle: The demo has a lyric that doesn't appear on the album. The demo ends with, “I'm the best you never had.” But that made it a little bit too literal. Best you “ever dot dot dot,” seems a little more mysterious and kind of open-ended. And I liked having it be that way, as opposed to being laid out.

(Vocals: “The best you ever”)

Michelle: Earlier that February, I had met Patrick Carney from The Black Keys at a Grammy party. I remember walking in, and like not really knowing anyone. And Patrick was sitting in the corner, and he flagged me over, and he was like, “What the hell have [laughter] you been doing? Like you haven't had a record out, what are you doing with your music? Are you still making music?” And that's when I told him like what was going on. And I said, “Hey, I know you're a really great producer. I would love it if you ever were open to working together. Could I send you some of my demos and pick your brain? I'd love to get your thoughts on it.” He was like, “Yeah, totally.” I ended up signing with Verve Records, July of 2015. And at the end of the month, Patrick and Gus Seyffert and I went into the studio in LA, at Gus' house to work on the record. Gus and Patrick knew one another, because Gus played bass in the touring band for The Black Keys. And Gus became our kind of co-pilot. And I remember we listened to the demo of “Best You Ever,” and we all agreed that it was like drag-y. It seemed too slow, and we

knew we wanted to speed it up. So we sped it up a bit, and Pat kind of laid down a drum loop.

(Drums)

Michelle: When we started, I like really wanted stuff to be a little more riff oriented and coming from guitar world, but Gus is such a fantastic bass player, a lot of that ended up being dictated in bass world.

(Bass)

(Drums join)

Michelle: There's three different bass parts going on. So there's the bass.

(Bass)

Michelle: And then, we have the Fender VI.

(Fender VI)

(Fender VI ends)

Michelle: What is a Fender VI? It's a low tuned guitar, I guess? Bass, what is it?

(Fender VI)

Hrishikesh: I'm interrupting for a second to answer the question. A Fender VI is a bass guitar. It was originally called a Fender Bass VI, but it's smaller than an electric bass, and it's styled more like an electric guitar, just tuned an octave lower. OK, back to Michelle.

Michelle: Gus had one at the studio. And I was talking about how I love Spaghetti Western sounding guitar parts. And I loved taking my guitar, and tuning it down to C. And Patrick was like, "Oh, have you ever played a Fender [laughter] VI?" And I was like, "No, what are you talking about [laughter]?" So we ended up doing it on a couple tracks on the album where we doubled the bassline with the Fender VI.

(Bass)

Michelle: There's also some synth bass on there,

(Synth bass)

Michelle: because it didn't feel like it was low enough.

(Synth bass ends)

Michelle: We all played synths throughout the record. There was a Roland,

(Roland synth)

Michelle: there was Prophet-6,

(Prophet-6 joins)

Michelle: and there was a Mellotron.

(Mellotron joins)

(Music ends)

Michelle: I wrote the bridge next, because there wasn't a bridge. And I remember writing it, sitting in the studio, I kind of played it for them in the room. And Patrick was like, "Great, go in and sing it."

(Vocals: "I've been wondering why I've tried so hard to win your love / I'm giving up")

Michelle: I think lyrically that bridge, as much as it's written about my ex-husband, it's probably written about my record label as well, of like, "I don't know why I'm trying to get you guys to be on board with me. Like I don't need you anymore."

(Vocals: "I don't want to waste any more time / So goodbye")

Michelle: And so, at that point, we were all like, "Okay, we're really into this. We really love this. We want to see what this leads to." I got signed to Verve, but the head of Verve, at the time, would only approve for us to do five songs. He was like, "I don't know if Patrick's the right producer for this. You've never worked together. So instead of giving you a full record budget, I'm only going to give you a budget to do five songs." I was like, "Okay, well, let's see what this is like." So we turned in those five songs, and the guy at the record label *hated* them. Like, I mean, hated. It was terrible. He [laughter] came down to the studio, and he heard them,

and it was so awkward, and we all just kind of sat there. And [laughter] smoke was like basically coming out of Patrick's ears and Gus' ears, and like tears were stinging in my eyes, because I was just like, "See, this is what happens when [laughter] I'm at a record company. I never get my music out!" I was already like looking for the escape hatch, and he left the studio. And at that point, Patrick was like, "You know what? Gus, Michelle, I'm really into this project. I believe in what we're doing. And if he doesn't believe in it to give you the budget to continue, fuck that guy. Like I'll pay for the album if you want to continue." And so, at that point, Patrick and Gus and I decided that we were going to just continue working on the album, and we weren't going to talk to the guy at the record [laughter] label. And we were basically like, "You know, at the end of the day, if we turn in this album, and it's finished, and he hates it, then I'll be able to get dropped from the record label, and I'll be able to take this album somewhere else, and it'll be mine at least." But Patrick was like,

(Synth)

Michelle: "I'll finance it, let's just work on it, the three of us. Like let's go rogue." And it was really fortuitous that it was Patrick when I walked [laughter] in at that party. And then, it ended up being him, because we ended up falling in love while we're making this record. So I'm glad it was him and not someone [laughter] else [laughter]. It was gradual for sure. I think just all of a sudden it was there. And we were like, "Oh, when did [laughter] that happen?" We were *constantly* talking. We'd leave a long day of being in the studio all day together, and separately go home late at night, and still be like texting. I remember going home from the studio, like one of the first days of working, and I told my sister who was living with me at the time. I was like, "I feel like I've just met someone who's going to change my life. Like, I feel like I've met my collaborator, like we're going to start a band or something. We just like totally are on the same wavelength." So it didn't occur to either [laughter] of us at that point that it was romantic. But, of course, like there's nothing more romantic than [laughter] telling someone that they're going to finance your album [laughter]. The guy who hated the initial stuff got fired. New label people came in, and we finished the album.

(Synth)

Michelle: As painful as it was not having an album out for that long span of time, I'm actually really grateful that those albums didn't come out, because I don't think they were right. And I feel like, as hard as it was emotionally [laughter], the time away afforded me kind of like a clean slate, and I found myself, when I started

this record, feeling like no one knew what to expect from me. And that was a really great place to be. It was incredibly freeing for me.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Best You Ever," by Michelle Branch, in its entirety.

("Best You Ever" by MICHELLE BRANCH)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for links to buy this track, and to learn more about Michelle Branch, and watch the video for "Best You Ever." For more on Patrick Carney, check out Song Exploder episode No. 80, in which Patrick and his Uncle Ralph Carney break down the theme they made for the Netflix show BoJack Horseman.

Next time on Song Exploder, Fleet Foxes.

("Mearcstapa" by FLEET FOXES)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Mearcstapa" by FLEET FOXES)

(Music fades)