

Song Exploder
Monica Martin - Go Easy, Kid
Episode 235

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.

("Go Easy, Kid" by MONICA MARTIN)

Hrishikesh: Monica Martin is a singer and songwriter based in Los Angeles. Before that, she was based in Madison, Wisconsin, where she was part of the indie rock band Phox. She's been a featured guest vocalist on songs by James Blake and Vulfpeck. In this episode, Monica breaks down her song "Go Easy, Kid," along with the track's producer, Khushi. She talks about making a song that's in part about how hard it can be to make a song. And more generally, how hard it can be to let go of things we get hung up on.

("Go Easy, Kid" by MONICA MARTIN)

Monica: My name is Monica Martin.

I started writing songs for an indie band that I was in, and I wrote, probably twenty songs at a fairly glacial pace, but I think it's because I know once I'm in that space, I'm going to have to interact with some deep feelings, and I try to avoid that at all costs *(Monica laughs)*.

That band ran its course, and over the last five years since, I started trying to get to know myself outside of the context of being in a band. I was talking with a good friend of mine, Theo Katzman, he writes a lot of songs and, yeah, we've had many conversations about not finishing songs, or avoiding getting even in the space of chewing on our emotions to, like, turn it into words. I'm like, "wow can you believe that we're spiraling out about this stuff because our jobs is, like making 3 minute ditties?" And then be like, "this is silly, we're writing songs. Let's just put it out and be less precious."

And then of course, the other side of that in me is, like, how important music has been for us, like when people put things into words that we've felt and they say it in a way that's so clear, and it's like, "oh gosh, that's so important."

(Piano plays)

I was hanging out with Jacob Jeffries, who knows the songbook really well, like Carole King songs and Burt Bacharach, and we started writing. And we talked about the sentiment of just being confused about everything and having these moments and conversations with friends like Theo, other songwriters.

(Jacob: "I love something about the, 'between the dreams in the dumpsters'.

(Synth plays)

Monica: 'We were talking out back by the garbage cans'

Jacob: Oh yeah!")

Monica: Jacob knowing the classics so well was lovely. So we sat down, wrote a melody, had a few lyrics.

(Jacob: Wait, I'm sorry. Top of that section?

Monica: 'We were talking out back by the garbage cans / About dreams that we had and the five-year plan / Missing the mark, I'm laughing in the dark')

Monica: I remember leaving and being like, "okay I think I'm into this!"

(Piano plays)

Khushi: My name is Khushi, and I'm the producer on "Go Easy, Kid." The first time I heard "Go Easy, Kid," there was a little scratch demo.

(Demo plays)

Khushi: I just felt very instinctively drawn to it.

Monica: I met Khushi at a James Bay show.

Khushi: Me and my friend Ama were there together, and he's a very striking man, and as he was walking ahead of me, an arm reached out and grabbed his arm. And a voice said,

Monica: “Sorry, sir? You’re the most handsome person I’ve ever seen.”

Khushi: And they started chatting, and for a while I felt a bit, like, left out ‘cause I was like, *oh, God, you know, they’re just into each other*. So I like, shuffled off in a bit and a half to get some beers, and eventually thought, *No, no, no. I should try to partake in this social event*. And then just quickly realized that Monica was just a very incredible, hilarious, inspiring person.

Monica: We meet about three months before the pandemic.

Khushi: And then we actually were in a relationship with each other for a while and now we’re friends.

Monica: We’re just like best friends; platonic partners for life. But, yeah, took a few months of just hanging out before we actually decided to make something.

Khushi: I remember being in the back of an Uber late at night in LA and just saying to her, “oh, I could produce your album.”

Monica: I was just like, “I think you’d do a beautiful job for ‘Go Easy, Kid.’ Would you want to do it?”

(Wurlizer)

Khushi: The Wurlizer was in there from the beginning, when we first started on the track. A friend of hers had sent the chords on MIDI to us.

Monica: We got the MIDI piano from Mateo Roberts.

Khushi: So I pulled the notes around just to make the voicings flow nicely.

(Wurlizer)

Khushi: I like the way the Wurlie just padded out the piano, and it adds this subtle, kind of, wobble underneath the piano.

Monica: So the songs starts, “I commit myself to sabotage / See I can get what I want / Then I make it hard to hold on.”

(Vocals: "I commit myself to sabotage / See I can get what I want / Then I make it hard to hold on")

Monica: 'Cause we just like to get in our own way. It's that self-fulfilling prophecy thing. It's like, "Oh I don't want to do this and mess up," and then you don't do the thing at all, which is a version of that.

(Vocals: "Convince myself that I'm without a god / A spiritual fraud who got lost in her own sad song")

(Processed Piano)

Khushi: I wanted to just, kind of, have an almost literal representation of that, with her voice kind of getting lost in this swamp. So that's a piano put through a plug in called Portal.

(Processed Piano)

Khushi: That helped make that piano sound like it's just kind of disintegrating or floating off. And then you get Monica's vocal effect on the lyric, "I'm just a spiritual fraud who got lost in her own sad song." And I felt like the slowing down, pitching down thing, kind of like, partly echo's the meaning of the lyric. Louis Vuitton

(Echoed vocals: " A spiritual fraud who got lost in her own sad song")

Monica: In the first chorus, I'm just picturing so many nights I've had at this particular spot, The Caribou, in Madison, Wisconsin. It's beautiful. It's a small bar, amber lighting, there's a laundromat next to it, people go smoke in the back, or just hang out, and there was the dumpsters back there.

(Vocals: "We were talking out back by the garbage cans / About dreams that we had, and the five-year plan")

Monica: It's just really literal. Like, "man remember, remember this, that and the other. Oh, we were going to do this and it fell through and missing the mark, yeah, missing the mark."

(Vocals: "Missing the mark / Laughing in the dark / 'Cause after all, no one's in control / Go easy, kid, it's only rock and roll")

Monica: I wanted to have it feel like a really familiar idiom. I have one friend who, when anything totally messed up happens, she's like, "that's showbiz, baby!" But there's something very freeing about embodying like, "I'm such an insignificant piece in this universe." So that's a little mantra: go easy, kid. It's only rock and roll.

Khushi: The next step in the song was arranging the strings.

(Strings)

Monica: Khushi and I were working out of this little studio, having limited access to players, we were considering all the different options of, like, how to make this song sound lush.

Khushi: And that started with, basically, the samples that we found on Splice, we just liked the tone of.

Monica: Splice is a collection of samples and sounds, and we found this string part that was so, so pretty.

Khushi: And I arranged them into a melody.

(Strings)

Khushi: And then later in the process I thought, *No, we need, in addition to that, we need the best that we can get.* So I used a website called fiverr, which connects me to all sorts of different people, and there's tons of session musicians on there. And we got a woman halfway around the world to record viola over it.

(Viola)

Khushi: So there's all possible different types of strings on there.

(Strings)

Monica: He made it feel really intentional, like, really lush without feeling so dramatic that it felt silly.

(Strings)

(Strings)

(Drum brushes join)

Khushi: I really love brushes on drums. I really love the way they sound. I really love the way they can bring in rhythm to a song, but still be soft and still be gentle and inviting.

(Drum brushes)

Khushi: Later down the line, a friend of hers called Jason Goldstein, a very talented pianist, came in and added a few extra piano flourishes throughout the song.

(Piano)

(Brushes join)

(Vocals: "Pledge allegiance to some sanity / It comes into view for a moment or two, then it leaves me"

Monica: So the second verse starts with, "pledge allegiance to some sanity / It comes into view for a moment or two, then it leaves me." There are many days where you're like, you wake up and you're like, *(inhales)* "Ah! What a beautiful, beautiful morning!" Instead of like, an inescapable, like, iron blanket of dread. And you, like, go, and you make breakfast and you're like, "Wow! This is lovely!" And when it's there for a minute, it's like, "ah this is great!"

(Piano and Drums play)

Monica: And then it goes, like flutters away and you're like, "Damn, bitch! Why'd you do this?! This sucks!"

(Backing vocals with piano)

Khushi: With some of the backing vocals, I actually just asked her to sing two tracks, just improvising backings and humming, and she literally did that in just two takes.

(Backing vocals)

Monica: That's probably the breeziest part of singing for me, or like any of these sessions. It's just fun and feels more natural, I'm not having to think of words.

(Backing vocals)

Khushi: So they just provide this kind of pad and they kind of, like, weave in and out of each other.

(Backing vocals)

Monica: In the second chorus, it's me having a conversation with an ex.

(Vocals: "I was talking out back with an empty man / He said, 'member times that we had before you go in that van")

Monica: You do feel kind of silly sometimes when you're missing out on potential bonds with, like, a romantic partner or you've missed your friend's wedding 'cause you're touring, but touring is really special and meaningful, and the balance *is* hard to find. And oftentimes, the person who is a, you know, cruel ex, who's having that conversation with you is maybe not someone who really cared about you flourishing thoroughly.

(Vocals: "Left me in the dark, alone in the park")

Monica: One of my favorite production things that Khushi did with this song was for the bridge.

Khushi: Probably like a month prior recording this with Monica, when I had been on tour, supporting a wonderful Icelandic artist called Ásgeir, he'd invited me into a sauna. And I've always loved the sound of water going onto that hot rock, and just evaporating. And I was like, "Okay, well, this time I'll just record a bunch of different takes of me putting the water on that hot stone."

(Water evaporating)

Khushi: It feels like we could do with some kind of building sound towards this bridge, so I pulled them in off my phone and reversed them, and panned them out.

(Reverse Water evaporating)

Khushi: And there's also a kind of link because the first line of the bridge is, "cut through the smoke," so suddenly those steam sounds cut off and you just left alone with her and the piano.

(Vocals: "Cut through the smoke / There's no secret special code")

Monica: My voice feels really clear and it feels like you're literally cutting through smoke.

(Vocals: "No deeper hidden wisdom / Just accept we'll never know")

Khushi: So at the end of the bridge Monica sings this long note and I wanted to build it up, so I took her vocal and duplicated it on different tracks, essentially to create, kind of like, manual delay.

(Delayed vocals)

Khushi: And then I realized that at the very end of her take, if you just chopped the tail off it, there was just this little wobble and so I took that and sampled it, had it repeating on the beat throughout the third chorus.

(Sampled vocal and Drum brushes)

(Vocals join: "We were talking out back by the garbage cans / About dreams that we had and the five-year plan")

Monica: And then, you know, there's a little bit of a variation in the outro.

Khushi: Monica was struggling with the end section 'cause it was never quite how she wanted.

(Voice memo: "Cause after all, no one's in control / Go easy, kid / In twenty years, kid, you're gonna look back / And wish you grabbed it all by the throat")

Monica: It just felt so musical theater that it was something for a minute I was like, "Ugh! I'm not going to be able to do this until I get different chords laid out." And then at some point, James Blake,

Hrishikesh: Who's a Grammy-winning, Mercury Prize-winning singer and songwriter and producer.

Monica: James is like, “oh, I’m hearing something. Can I put something down?” And of course, my heart is like exploding. Like of course you can put something down!

(Piano)

Khushi: I've known James for a while now so when I started playing Monica's stuff to James, James was just blown away.

Monica: And then I'm sort of spinning, I'm like, “what am I going to do with the vocals?”

Khushi: Monica's a perfectionist, as many great singers are. I'm often like, “this sounds incredible, like you've just sung some absolute gold.” And Monica's like, “No, no, no, that's absolutely terrible, we need to do it again.” So she recorded those leads.

(Vocals: “Cause after all, no one's in control / Go easy, kid”)

Khushi: I'm in awe of Monica as a singer.

(Vocals: “In twenty years, kid / We're gonna look back and wish you grabbed it all by the throat / And said, ‘fuck it. It's only rock and roll”)

Monica: I swear a lot. But, yeah, I think functionally in the song, the “F” and the “K” cuts through the air, hits the ear. It does work. It feels, you know, severe in the sense that it's like, how severely I need to consider letting go,

(Piano)

Monica: *(laughs)* you know? And how, in how many years pass and we feel so silly every year past, and you're like, “Ugh! I did that same thing; I round off all my edges, I made myself small, I, you know, existed with so much guilt and worry and shame, knowing that it's a choice, a practice that we can work on.”

(Piano)

Khushi: I often think that we, actually, end up writing the songs that we need to hear ourselves the most. I'm sure there's an element of Monica singing to herself, as well as singing to others.

Monica: I want to have a more “fuck it” attitude all the time. Just like, “fuck it.” No one would describe me as, like, chill, really. But that’s why I’m like, (*inhales and exhales*) “Okay, we can try, we can just try to remember, ‘it’s only rock and roll.’”

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “Go Easy, Kid” by Monica Martin, in its entirety.

(“Go Easy, Kid” by MONICA MARTIN)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You’ll find links to stream or download “Go Easy, Kid,” and you can watch a video of a version of the song where Monica sings it live with James Blake.

Song Exploder, and the show’s theme music, were made by me. I produced this episode with Craig Ealy and Casey Deal, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith and production assistance from Chloe Parker.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network independent, listener supported, artist owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @hrishihirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder T-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I’m Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.