

Song Exploder
Mustafa - Air Forces
Episode 217

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.

("Air Forces" by MUSTAFA)

Hrishikesh: Mustafa is a singer, songwriter, and poet from Toronto. He gained national recognition in Canada for his poetry. In 2016, he served on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Youth Advisory Council. As a songwriter, he contributed to the Grammy award-winning album *Starboy* by The Weeknd, and he's written songs for Usher, Camila Cabello, and others. In May 2021, he released his own debut album, called *When Smoke Rises*, inspired by his experiences losing friends to inner-city violence. His album's been critically acclaimed, and it was shortlisted for the Polaris Prize. I spoke to Mustafa about his song "Air Forces." It's a track he made with his longtime collaborator, Grammy-winning producer Frank Dukes, plus Swedish artist Simon On The Moon, and Jamie xx. Here's Mustafa on Song Exploder.

("Air Forces" by MUSTAFA)

Mustafa: My name is Mustafa Ahmed.

(Music fades)

Mustafa: I was raised in Regent Park. It's the first and largest housing project in Canada. It's right at the center of downtown Toronto, a short walk away from the busiest intersection in Canada. Yeah, it's a community like any conventional hood, you know? There's like systemic barriers, you know, education barriers, not a lot of open roads, but that made for the closeness of community that like you just didn't get elsewhere. My life before the record was incredibly immersed in how I was going to preserve the stories of my community. And I remember when "Air Forces" came to me. I was editing this short film on violence in the city. And I interviewed people from communities that we have been at war with for years, and communities that are like practically mirrors of mine. People just like me that are experiencing the same kind of grief that I'm experiencing. But it was hard for me to familiarize with them at all, you know, because of this territorial warfare. But what happened was, when I was working on this short film, I interviewed

people, and I was able to ask them a simple question of how they want to be remembered when they're no longer here, and how they want their friends to be remembered.

("Remember Me, Toronto" short film audio clip: "I just want them to remember me by like my brother's keeper like, you know what I mean? I'm always somebody that is gonna be there for, for the next man or be there for my sister, be there for my mother, you know what I mean? I wanna be remembered as somebody that left a good mark on them not just a negative vibe, just something that they can take from and say, "You know what, at least he achieved something that we can have and it's longer than him")

Mustafa: And I was looking at like the faces and the interviews of people from communities like mine. Looking at their softness and their sensitivity coming out as they answer the question of how they want to be remembered. And in that, I found a kind of empathy, you know, that I think I was bereft of. And a lot of the rage that I felt, and the frustrations I felt about the system, and about other people that have inflicted harm on my community, when that rage started to dissipate, that's when I was able to approach that song.

(Guitar)

Mustafa: I actually have the original "Air Forces" vocal recording that I recorded on my phone.

(Vocals with guitar)

Mustafa: I remember I sat in the studio with my friend Simon Hessman. We were listening to a lot of Nick Drake, just trying to like immerse myself in folk songs that I loved. After that, we just started like writing chords. The first thing that came to me was, "Don't crease your air forces, just stay inside tonight."

(Vocals with guitar: "Don't crease your air forces / Just stay at home this time / You know what happens during these nights")

Mustafa: Those were the words that came to me. And then I knew that I was like exploring something honest, you know.

(Vocals with guitar)

(Guitar)

Mustafa: Simon, he just is like a beautiful human being, and so it was easy to like be open with him, and to make mistakes before him.

(Guitar ends)

Mustafa: I was with my manager in London and I played him this song. And he was like, "Well, we have to bring Simon to London." And we just wrote songs together every day, and slowly the project came together.

(Vocals with guitar: "Don't crease your air forces / Just stay inside tonight / You know what's happening outside")

(Guitar)

Mustafa: I just took on the perspective of like the caregiver and it is a thought that comes to me all the time, but I was really thinking about the mothers in the community, and the kind of like unmanageable weight that they feel when their sons step out into a world that they know was not built or designed to protect them. And then I was like, "Okay, I have to take it further." I'm like, "I want to continue to describe this person, describe the narrative by way of like, maybe even material things." And so that was when I described the chain of like, you know, "You say it's okay, but you tuck your chain."

(Vocals with guitar: "You say it's okay / But you tucked your chain / Like if they take it / I won't see you for a while")

(Guitar)

Mustafa: It was almost like I was choosing folk chords and doing what my friends who are rappers do when they hear a beat. Because I've been in those rap sessions, for so many years of my life, I was just doing the same exact thing except I was taking a different

(Guitar ends)

Mustafa: musical form. And I was just like, "Okay, cool. Like let me describe my life. Like, let me describe what's going on. Like, let me describe loss.

(Vocals: “And I tell you how I feel / In case it’s the last time / You know the odds, you know the flaws / It’s all by design / And you’ll go anywhere, though it ain’t safe / Just know that I care, I’ll always care / And I’ll be awake”)

Mustafa: The original idea I had when it was just those guitar parts and my voice, that's how I wanted to release the song. I kind of resisted the idea of like producing the song out. But then I'm like, you know, after having some conversations I knew that I had a responsibility to take it to a place sonically that also felt progressive.

(Guitars)

Mustafa: Then we just kind of filtered the guitars.

(Filtered guitars)

Mustafa: And then, added like you know, kind of this rhythm.

(Beat joins)

(Beat with filtered guitars end)

Mustafa: Frank Dukes was the executive producer of the record. He's like my closest collaborator. Frank Dukes, I met when I was 18 years old. And I messaged him and I said, “Hey, I'm like, I really admire the work that you do.” And he said, “You should come and meet with me.” And he was nervous that I was going to come and want to do poetry. And I was nervous that he thought that I wanted to come and do poetry [laughter]. We started to explore songs together, you know. That's when I was incredibly young, and so I learned a lot from him throughout the years of just making music with him. And we wrote a lot of songs for other people together. And I always told Frank that I wanted to tap into what the sonics of my Nubian culture was, because I think it was something that informed a lot of what the communities look like and feel like. And I hear my mother singing these melodies and these words as she's washing dishes and I wanted to hold onto that, and I wanted it to be a part of the narrative. So we were listening to like, the Sudanese songs of burial and war.

(“The Age-Set” by DINKA PEOPLE OF ABYEI)

(Music ends)

Mustafa: And I was like, “Oh, this is amazing,” because it's like, these are like the chants that would be shared, when the men would return from war. And then here I am taking on a perspective of like what it feels like when young boys and girls are stepping out into the war.

(Guitar)

Mustafa: I thought those parallels were incredible. And so, when that project came to me, by way of Frank, it was like kind of inevitable that it was going to be a part of the song.

(Beat with “The Age-Set” sample join)

(Music ends)

Mustafa: Jamie xx found a Mickey Newbury sample.

(Mickey Newbury sample)

Mustafa: I didn't even know it was Mickey Newbury when he first played it. And Mickey Newbury being like such a beautiful folk singer, I was happy that we were able to weave him into the song.

(Guitars)

(Mickey Newbury sample with claps join)

(Guitars with claps)

(Guitars with claps end)

Mustafa: In the second verse, I was just exploring what our lives, and our mortality, and survival can look like in a community like Regent Park.

(Vocals: “To what are we even destined? / Will we have wives and children / Or is that not written for you and I?”)

Mustafa: Truthfully, it's like it doesn't matter if you were putting on the chain or if you have the gun or if you don't. It's like we're all vulnerable to state violence, we're all vulnerable to the poison of poverty, you know, and the poison of anti-blackness,

and so many other things. Exploring that was so necessary for me in the second verse.

(Vocals: "And all these intersections / Where we've been kept and left in / I wonder why God keeps us alive")

Mustafa: When I was writing the background vocals on "Air Forces," I would just want it to be subtle and I want it to be gentle. And I just want it to feel almost like it's just lifting it texturally, more than anything else.

(Vocals: "Or is that not written for you and I")

Mustafa: And so, "I wonder why God keeps us alive," I wanted that to lift, even in the slightest, and so that's why I chose to like find like, you know, a subtle harmony there.

(Vocals: "I wonder why God keeps us alive?")

Mustafa: Throughout the song, I wanted it to feel that it was of course about this deep care that I have. And this love letter that I'm writing for my brothers in the hood, but also this letter I wrote as a reminder to myself of like the condition of this community.

(Vocals: "Just know that I care, I'll always care / And I'll be awake")

(Vocals, guitar, and claps: "I'll be awake / I'll be awake / I'll be awake / Awake")

Mustafa: I've had a difficult time sleeping for years. After the burial of each friend, you know, that insomnia continually got the best of me. And for so many people, it is that way. You can get a call at any given moment in the night. You just don't know if that's going to be the final call you receive from someone.

(Vocals, guitar, and claps: "Awake / I'll be awake / I'll be, I'll be, I'll be")

(Vocals: "Ahhh")

Mustafa: Frank Dukes is singing on that part of "Air Forces."

(Vocals)

Mustafa: Of course, he filtered it and put a lot of things on his voice.

(Processed vocals)

Mustafa: It almost felt like an instrument.

(Processed vocals)

Mustafa: And so, when he did that, I decided that I was going to just find a harmony over top of what he did.

(Harmonized vocals join)

Mustafa: We wanted the song to feel like it was at a climax, you know what I mean? That now, like all the voices have kind of joined together, you know, the voices of Nubia and my own voice.

("The Age-Set" sample joins)

(Music ends)

Mustafa: This song ends with my friend's voice, a close friend of mine named Puffy. And I called him, and I said, "I need you to describe what the walk home feels like."

(Vocals: "You see a couple kids runnin' around, playing games / The dope boys ridin' around")

Mustafa: If you step outside of your household in the hood, most times, it's like you're walking quickly, you have to be alert, and you don't get an opportunity to like just appreciate the existence of your home community, you know? I could remember faintly what it was like when we were younger, because when we were younger, we were freer. And so, that's when he started to describe things to me. He's like, "When I walk out, you know, like I see the green box, there's people chillin'."

(Vocals: "ridin' bikes / Then you see obviously mans comin' over at the green box")

Mustafa: Yeah, it was like an entire universe in this open circle of like a backyard. And that's where a lot of my first experiences took place. It was like my first time using a water gun, my first time watching my cat be outside of the home. It was little things, but it was things that it couldn't focus on, later on. And so, I just

wanted there to be an account of what that was from someone that lived there. After experiencing the kind of traumas that I did, the community and my idea of the community, my relationship with the community, transformed completely. And I think that in the effort of even having Puffy's voice at the end, was to try to return to what it felt like in the beginning.

(Vocals: "Just crackin' jokes, kickin' up")

(Guitar)

Mustafa: I do feel like I'm incredibly bitter sometimes. Bitter about the fact that I had to write these songs. I will never forgive the publications who announced the deaths of my friends using dated mugshots. I will never forgive them for that. The fact that people in my community and people like myself couldn't even grieve is something that I'm going to have to try and make peace with, for the rest of my life. I'm just trying to chase as quickly, and as purposefully as I can, a humanity. If I could, when it's all said and done, it's like I made myself and the people around me a little more human, then, then maybe it wasn't all in vain.

(Guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Air Forces," by Mustafa, in its entirety.

("Air Forces" by MUSTAFA)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net/mustafa. You'll find links to buy or stream, "Air Forces," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, production assistance from Chloe Parker, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Special thanks to Alec Bemis. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of 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 podcast @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

