

Song Exploder
Nakhane - New Brighton (ft. Anohni)
Episode 155

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.

("New Brighton" by NAKHANE ft. ANOHN!)

Thao: This episode contains explicit language. Nakhane is a singer and songwriter from Johannesburg, South Africa. His first album, *Brave Confusion*, won the South African Music Award for best alternative album in 2014. He starred in the award-winning film "The Wound," which was shortlisted for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Nakhane's second album, *You Will Not Die*, was originally released in 2018, and then released in the US in 2019, as a deluxe version. The deluxe version includes this song, "New Brighton," featuring guest vocals from Anohni. In this episode, as Nakhane breaks the song down, he talks about his complicated relationship with Christianity, why the song wasn't on the original version of the album, and what it was like to work with one of his musical heroes.

("New Brighton" by NAKHANE ft. ANOHN!)

Nakhane: This is Nakhane.

(Music fades out)

Nakhane: I actually wrote New Brighton on the 31st of December 2013. It was New Year's Eve, and my family had gone to my Aunt's house, and I decided to not celebrate New Year's Eve with them because I wanted to write music. Before then, I'd written my first album on an acoustic guitar with just voice, recorded on a cell phone, because I didn't have recording equipment. But for the first time I had my own laptop, because I toured my first album, and had a little bit of money. And I bought a laptop, an electric guitar, a hard drive and a microphone. I knew from the onset that I wanted to make something more electronic, and the first demo was so experimental.

(Demo)

Nakhane: It opens up with soundscapes and me recording myself dropping a plate on the floor.

(Sound of plate hitting the floor)

Nakhane: But the song actually started with that guitar line.

(Demo guitar line)

Nakhane: The lyrics for the song had been written that afternoon. My aunt and I had gone to buy fish [laughter] at the harbor, and she was playing hymns in the car, and I had this idea of writing a song with the words, "And all the seraphim and all the cherubim," because one of the hymns had those words. And I remember just sitting there thinking, "Oh my God, this would be such a great motif in a song."

(Vocals along with synth pad: "And all the seraphim / And all the cherubim")

Nakhane: The seraphim and the cherubim are angels. These are angels that are supposed to protect not only the people of God, but also to send messages. And then there was a question, "Did they avert their eyes to all that was going on?" And then you can't ask that question without looking at Apartheid, without looking at slavery, without looking at the church as a tool for colonialism.

(Vocal lines with echos along with pad: "And all the seraphim")

Nakhane: So these people that God has delegated to protect his people, the angels, "Where the fuck are you bros? When people were enslaved, where were you? Why aren't you protecting us from your own people?" And that may sound like naive but I do think that it's the first question that you ask yourself when you start to question your beliefs. And I knew that the song was going to be about some walking away from something, which was the church. And so, for the first time in my life as a songwriter, I wasn't using biblical imagery as a belief system, because I was a Christian. But I became apostate and I left the church. And this was very painful for me.

(Demo)

(Demo fades out)

Nakhane: That December before I wrote the song, I said to my mom, it was the morning, and we were sitting in bed, you know, drinking coffee, and she was like, "Nakhane, I just need you to explain to me, are you an atheist now?" And I was like, "I don't know!" I was trying to explain to her that I'm in an in-between state.

And I said to her, “But mom, the dutch arrived in 1652 in South Africa, and they converted us to Christianity.” And I said to her, “We didn't start existing then, there's thousands and thousands of years of history before all these people arrive. Are you saying to me that all our ancestors were going to hell up until these people arrived?” She said, “Well, no. And I don't know why, I can't give you a neat answer, but of course not.” And I said, “Then there must be more.” And that song, I guess, started there.

(Demo guitar line)

Nakhane: The first demo of the song is like 7 minutes but I got bored with the formlessness of what it first was. And normally, I will leave the song alone for a few months, come back to it, and go, “Oh, okay, that was a good idea. That was a bad idea [laughter].” And then I record different versions of the song so the next one, I go, “Okay. I want it to be more rhythmic, I want to make a more uptempo version.” And I was saying to my boyfriend, “I'm going to write a pop song.” I started creating drum loops.

(Second demo)

Nakhane: And I remember thinking, “Huh okay, that sounds catchy. That sounds poppy,” and whether I like it or not, it is a political song, someone could even say that it is a protest song, because it is protesting colonialism.

(Second demo fades out)

Nakhane: But during apartheid, musicians like Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela, they used beautiful music to sing about the darkest things.

(“Bring Him Back Home (Nelson Mandela)” by HUGH MASEKELA)

Nakhane: And sometimes you need that sort of cushioning to get the message across, you know. A song sounds beautiful and then people go, “Wait a minute, what did they say?”

(“Bring Him Back Home (Nelson Mandela)” by HUGH MASEKELA)

Nakhane: You sort of slip in with beauty, and then challenge them with words.

(Second demo)

Nakhane: "New Brighton" was the first song I wrote for the album but I demoed it a few times and, labels and producers, no one seemed to care for it.

(Second demo)

Nakhane: And I remember thinking, "Oh alright, you know, it's okay, I have enough good songs for this album." And initially, I wanted to write a more political album but the album ended up being about my family, me leaving Christianity, and queerness, instead of being about politics. And then, there was a TV show and they asked me to perform a song, and I said, "The album isn't out yet." And they said, "Okay, give us a B-side." And I was like, "Okay, I'll perform this song called "New Brighton." I performed it, and the label saw it and heard it, and they were like, "Where was this song when you were recording?" And I was like, "It was there from the beginning but no one seemed to care for it." And so we decided to record it, and that's when the producers came in and we decided to make this version of the song. Mostly I played 90% of the instruments in my albums. But this is the first song where I just played the guitar and sang. So it was a first time that a song was recorded with a band. The first thing I loved were the sighs in the beginning, those "Ah's".

(Sigh sound)

Nakhane: It's actually a guitar, and it made a sound like that, and then Charlotte Hatherley, who played synthesizers, what you hear alongside that is also her going, "Haaaaa".

(Sigh sound along with guitar)

Nakhane: To make a sound that vocally almost resembled it. And I really, really enjoyed it because I thought it was so irreverent. I mean there was always humor in my music in the lyrics but for the first time there was humor in the music. And that sound was one of the first things that I really, really liked.

(Sigh sound along with guitar)

Nakhane: The other thing I really, really liked was the drum sound because I'm obsessed with drums.

(Drums)

Nakhane: And in a lot of South African pop music that's how it works, that's just how we count. Things are still a little bit more loose.

(Guitar line ends)

Nakhane: And I think that's cultural. And I think that particular guitar line needed me to play it, because it was the cornerstone of the song. It was the first thing that came to me. I went to Paris to record the vocals.

(Vocals: "I slipped on the pebbles on the way to the gate / Held my balance on the cuff of your shirt")

Nakhane: The song is about monuments, walking around my city, Port Elizabeth, and seeing all these colonial monuments and going, "Why are we celebrating these people who stole from us? These people who oppressed us?"

(Vocals: "We were going to the Port Elizabeth's port / Up on the hill, you did point was Frederick's fort")

Nakhane: South Africa was [laughter] a gold mine, but not only in labor but also in resources and land. And there were wars and different European countries used to build forts, not only to fight against the indigenous people, but also to fight against other European countries who were fighting for the piece of land, which is why I loathe forts. I'm like, "What the fuck were they fighting for, they were not supposed to be here!" And everyday when I go to buy bread, I'm reminded of that history.

(Synth pad)

Nakhane: You see these monuments and these proud white men and sometimes women, and on the base of the monument is the name. And we'll always remember those people, well the monument was supposed to help people remember someone fondly. And my question was, "How can I remember these people fondly? My anger, which I'm allowed to have, says their name should be obliterated from history, I don't want to know them. I want to know the people who created me, the people who gave birth to me. Where was their name?"

(Vocals along with synth pad: "Never knew them before, don't know them now / What about my mother and her sisters? / Where was their name? / I was up-set")

Nakhane: It's a simple line, "I was upset." Because the people who raised me, the people who should have been celebrated, the people who look like me, were seen as subhuman. And these men, these white guys who arrived almost 300 years ago, were seen as saints, saviors, no. Colonizers are not in colonized spaces to create newness, they're there to extend whatever was happening in their country of origin. And you see that with names, and that's why it was so important for me to name the song after the township which is called New Brighton, named after Brighton in England.

(Vocals along with pad: "Up in the black New Brighton sky / Was a flare")

Nakhane: My mom and my aunts were all classically trained singers. So I grew up in 60 voice choirs, and I knew that I wanted it to sound like a choir.

(Harmonized vocals: "And all the seraphim")

Nakhane: So on some level I was sort of hearkening back to that world again.

(Harmonized vocals: "And all the Cherubim")

(Vocals fade out)

Nakhane: The guest vocalist in the track is none other than the great, legendary Anohni. She's one of my favorite singers in the world. When I was 20 years old, Anohni released, *I Am a Bird Now*.

("Hope There's Someone" by ANOJNI / ANTONY AND THE JOHNSONS)

Nakhane: And I heard that voice, and I heard those words, and nothing was ever the same to me, again. Musically, personally, politically, everything changed. I had never heard of the word transgender before. And I looked at people that I loved before, who were called names, bad names. And I understood them more, because I was learning so much from Anohni. And when we were just about to finish the song, it was done, I had the idea of maybe featuring someone, and she'd wrote on her Facebook that she loved my music, which was completely insane to me. How can Anohni know who I am? Not only that, she likes my music. You know, like this is mad." Okay, "Hi Mark," as I emailed my manager, "Do you think it's possible for us to get Anohni to sing in this track?" Long shot. But we email her, she says, "Yes." And I was in Australia last year, when she finally sent her vocals. I remember I was jet lagged and it was 3:00 AM in Sydney, and I would listen to

it underneath my covers. And I started shaking. I got up and I switched on my lights, and I started jumping up and down my bed.

(Anohni vocals: “Never live in fear again / No, never again / Never, never, never again / Never, never again / Never leave in fear again / No never again”)

Nakhane: One of the notes I sent to my mixing engineer, I said, “Mix her like an ancestor.” When she comes in, I wanted her to sound like an epiphany. That moment of understanding.

(Anohni vocals with guitar and synth pad: “Never live in fear again / No, never again”)

(Guitar)

Nakhane: “Never live in fear again.” She was saying that to me, I felt. It’s the fear of people’s power over you whether that is colonial power, homophobia, racism, transphobia. And the fear that your history doesn’t matter. All of those things that you’ve been told over and over and over again. And being able to look at them in the face and say, “Fuck you.” And I guess on some level, that’s what the song is. But do it with joy, and do it with life.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here’s “New Brighton,” by Nakhane ft. Anohni, in its entirety.

(“New Brighton” by NAKHANE ft. ANOJNI)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Nakhane and Anohni. You’ll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. Special thanks to Dave Godowsky and the folks at iZotope for their help with this episode. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.