

Song Exploder
Perfume Genius - Slip Away
Episode 105

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.

("Slip Away" by PERFUME GENIUS)

Hrishikesh: Mike Hadreas has been making music under the name Perfume Genius since 2008. In May 2017, he put out his fourth album, *No Shape*, to widespread critical acclaim. In this episode, Mike breaks down the song "Slip Away." I also spoke with producer Blake Mills, who also plays on the track, and recording engineer Shawn Everett about the unusual way the song was recorded. Here's Perfume Genius on Song Exploder.

("Slip Away" by PERFUME GENIUS)

Mike: It's Mike from Perfume Genius.

(Music fades)

Mike: Before I wrote "Slip Away," I was writing very different songs for about a month. I was writing really dark, wordless, chanting over drones, and they were very kind of formless and creepy.

(Synth pad)

Mike: The last album was more of an electronic like exorcism singing in tongues. At least, that was the stuff I enjoyed performing the most. So I thought, *Why don't I just do that for 45 minutes* [laughter]?

(Synth pad fades)

Mike: And then, suddenly one day, I made this song. It was the keyboard first. I had a keyboard that sounded kind of like a guitar jam.

(Vocals with keyboard guitar)

Mike: You know, I didn't have words yet. It was just emoting, but it was much poppier, it had like a chorus.

(Vocals with keyboard guitar)

Mike: And that felt more like the direction I was supposed to go in. It was, it felt way, infinitely more exciting, and even strangely more uncomfortable and challenging, than all that kind of creepier stuff I was making. It wasn't purely intuitive. I like thought about the chords, what chord to go to next? I thought about having a bridge and a chorus. And I used to think those would cancel out the spirit. If I worked too hard, I always thought the emotion would be lost, but that kind of changed for me with writing this album. And I felt like it enhanced the soul of it, all the work I was putting into mapping the actual structure and arrangement out. It's funny because the demo is called "Band.mp3," just because I don't know, I wrote this imagining this sort of like stadium anthem. I knew eventually I wouldn't want it to be prepared exactly like that. And to have, you know, the instruments be a little more subversive than just a straight up rock cut. But I wanted the song to sound American, and I wanted the language to be mine, but be weirdly universal in like a classic American pop song way. I kind of wanted that sort of Springsteen-y spirit to it. Like a lot of like rock dudes. They're just like, "Here's my big fat album. It's amazing." And then, everyone's like, "Yes. It is. We love it [laughter]." They don't need to explain, nobody's asking them questions about like their home life or anything. They're just like, "You're a genius. We love it." There's this specific kind of confidence to it, and swagger to it that feels far from me. So it felt kind of thrilling to steal some of it.

(Music ends)

Mike: My producer Blake, I sent him all my demos, and he sent me back pages of notes that were really thoughtful and exciting. I could just tell before we had even spoken that he understood the spirit of it.

Blake: My name is Blake Mills, and I produced and performed on the Perfume Genius record. The demo for "Slip Away," to me, it sounded like, you know, he was writing this song from a place of guitar based music like Bruce Springsteen. But even

(Keyboard guitar)

Blake: though the pattern felt like a guitar figure, it had a certain disjointed quality, a kind of lopsidedness to it when it's played on keys, and everything's all down strokes like that. It doesn't sound as smooth as guitar, but I liked the idea of it not just reading like a rock and roll song. And so, we were trying to find an instrument to play it on that was sort of unidentifiable, that was removed from the family of guitars.

Mike: That's a lot of the reason why we worked in a studio we did, is that it was just filled with instruments I had never seen before or heard of from all over the place. And so, it felt like a magical, it was like a fantasy movie. When you go to like an old bookstore, and pick up an old book, and you'd like accidentally go into a different world when you open it. It was that kind of feel being in there.

Blake: And in that room that we were tracking in, never been used on a record before, it was just sitting there collecting dust, turned out to be this weird guitar shaped Mbira from Mali. It's like a series of metal tines, and you strike them, and they, you know, it sounds like [mimics mbira]. This particular one had a pickup in it, so you could plug it into an amp.

(Mbira)

Blake: It's the mbira plugged into a Roland jazz chorus. The two speakers in the amp, they're modulating the signal back and forth, both in volume and pitch. We've mic'd the amp and stereo, so that we could then send one of those speakers all the way to the left side, and one of those speakers all the way to the right. So it just widens that underwater chorus effect.

(Mbira ends)

Blake: The verse, as soon as the vocal comes in, it goes to guitar that is tuned down, and I'm tapping the string. So I'm hitting it percussively instead of strumming it. It's just sort of this percussive way of playing guitar with your fingers.

(Guitar)

Mike: That's a very like Blake Mills signature thing. I don't know how he fucking did that.

Blake: There's a technique to it to get it to not have a defined attack, you know, to just be this kind of these little clouds of notes that happen and kind of like a slow strobe effect.

Mike: I think he's the only one that can play in that way.

(Guitar fades)

Mike: You know, this song could easily have gone full on band, rock and roll, and I wanted all of it to be prepared in a more subversive way. I think we wanted to stick a little knife in every little thing. So it was just always a little bit off. I think that that communicates the spirit a lot more. I think if something is too beautiful, or too kind and gentle or sweet, it becomes background music. And I feel like if there's a little bit of dissonance, it makes everything more lasting, and it even enhances the joy.

(Guitar)

Blake: It was so important for us to create a world. What that does to empower Mike, and the things that he writes about, and his interpretations of this world, and his experiences in this world, trying to remove the sense of familiarity every so often, I just feel like, helps to keep it seeming kind of magical.

(Guitar ends)

Mike: This song, it's sort of joyous and free in a way that I had never written before. And it was almost confusing at first, and it came out very easily [laughter]. I couldn't tell if it was good or not, because it was very foreign [laughter]. I was like, "Can I do this? Is this me? Is this good? Are people going to want to listen to it?" I think that's part of the reason why it felt scary to share, and felt more uncomfortable than all the darker things, is because it was truly how I was feeling in the moment.

(Vocals: "Oh, ooh, love / They'll never break the shape we take / Oh, ooh / Baby, let all them voices slip away")

Mike: It's about love, and like physical love, and spiritual love in the face of other people telling you it's wrong, or not natural, or not alright. Or, you know, even in defiance and in rebellion against yourself, thinking you're not capable of it or

worthy of it. And just the loving, so powerful and real and true that it can't be shaken or broken by any of those things.

(Synth pad)

Mike: I had been getting shit for being gay before I had kissed anyone. I had been told repeatedly that there's something wrong with me, and that who I want to kiss, that that makes me bad, you know [laughter]? Those people telling you those things eventually translate into you. You keep it with you, and you start telling it to yourself. I didn't, wasn't ashamed of myself until people started telling me I should be.

(Synth pad ends)

Mike: But that's why I felt like it was important for me to write this song, and write more songs with that essence to it. You know, maybe if I'm not fully there, I haven't shaken all of it, that's what I need, instead of all the things I was writing before. Because the last song was very angry, and it was very much singing at those people, at whatever my oppressors are, you know, it was all directed at them. And these songs are more for me, and for my family, and my friends, and the people that are already listening. I don't really care about convincing anyone else anymore or changing their minds. I just feel more interested right now in existing on my own, and with everyone else in a happier way, or at least nearer to it.

(Synth)

Mike: It's definitely a love song. I've been with the same guy for eight years. So yeah [laughter], Alan. For sure, it's a love song. It's one I wish I would have heard when I was young, you know? Because I kind of, I write for Alan, I write for me, I write for me when I was 12, I write for other 12 year olds that need it, you know what I mean? It's my song, but I don't know, I try to carry a bunch of different people with me when I'm writing.

Blake: Alan is Mike's boyfriend, and collaborator, and piano player in the live band. They're like an old married couple. You know, Alan's been around Mike, and he's probably like, out of all of us, he's probably Mike's biggest fan. But he's had such an exposure to Mike that he's like, he doesn't put up with any, you know, any bullshit. So like, you know, we were all like, "Yes, it's amazing." And Alan's like, "I don't know about, I don't know if I buy it on this line," you know? So he

was like the voice of reason a lot of times. And I think really pushed to get the best out of Mike.

(Vocals: "Don't hold back, I want to break free / God is singing through your body / And I'm carried by the sound")

Mike: I have a lot of rules and stuff, and ways that I treat my voice at home. Certain EQs that I use on certain parts of my voice, that I don't like so much. But when I go in the studio, I try to kind of shake some of that off. Those are all sort of bullshit rules anyways. I kind of rely on my boyfriend for some of that too, to keep me in check. I don't ever want to make stuff, or treat my voice. I don't want to be afraid of it, or try to make it sound like something it's not, you know, I don't want to try to cover up any of the breaks in my voice [laughter].

(Vocals: "Every drum, every single beat / They were born from your body / And I'm carried by the sound")

Shawn: My name's Shawn Everett, and I recorded and mixed the Perfume Genius record. We recorded most of the record on this binaural head. It's like a Neumann microphone. It looks exactly like a human head,

Mike: like whole torso and head, and the microphones were placed in the ears of the mannequin.

Shawn: And I believe it's like the consistency and weight of a human head. And mathematically built, so it represents the way sound moves around a human head. I should have recorded this interview on the binaural head.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

("You're rolling")

Shawn: Right now, I'm in front of the head. Now I'm to the side of the head. Now I'm whispering behind the head. Now I'm whispering into the ear. Now I'm whispering into another ear. I had just kind of got it. And then, the Perfume Genius thing started, and when I was talking to Blake about it, you know, he really wanted to create different worlds, and explore different kind of sonic territory. And just like, imagine a spatial field of like where you are in this kind of wild place that Mike exists. And so, I was like, "Oh, we have got to bring this head! I just got this head! And then, I brought that down, and then immediately

we started using it, and I think we've used it on almost every instrument on the record, we just used it everywhere.

Mike: To be honest, some of it was kind of off putting, because it made my vocal sound incredibly clear and very present in the mix. And, in headphones, it sounds like I'm singing in the center sometimes of your head, of like the listener's head. Just so clear, which is, took some getting used to, but I knew it helped communicate the songs more. I'm so used to reverb, or sounding a little more distant, or having mystery around my voice. So that was a new thing for me to be so present. And I think that the dummy compounded that, because it was almost like I was singing directly to someone. But I eventually wanted some more choral, like beautiful parts to it. Something more dreamy and ethereal.

(Vocals: "Oh, ooh, love / They'll never break the shape we take / Oh, ooh, love, love / They'll never break the shape we take / Oh, ooh / Baby, let all them voices slip away")

Blake: The way that Mike writes, you know, to say, "they'll never break the shape we take," that's such a poetic way to talk about a relationship as, you know, these two pieces that create one shape. That is the form, and that you protect one another for the sake of this thing that you both make up, that you can't have without the other.

(Thumbtack piano)

Mike: It's actually a Thumbtack piano. It's a regular piano, but if you open it up on the stoppers, they're a little Thumbtack. So when they hit the strings, it has a harsher, more like harpsichord-like sound to it.

(Thumbtack piano ends)

Mike: The whole idea of the song is that, you know, it got so big and so beautiful, that it kind of went all the way back around to breaking, to the point where it kind of dissolves, and that's where something kind of dissonant creeps in. I think because being able to get that sort of freedom and joy is not lasting. And then, you're like snapped back into

(Percussion)

Mike: reality or your version of it that's not as kind. And I think that song's a lot about kind of stealing those moments when they come up, and recognizing them as

sacred, even if they only last for two and a half minutes. When I first heard that first big break in the song, where everything is turned up to 11, and everything comes on, it was a really great moment. I think both me and Alan got sort of teary-eyed.

(Vocals join: "Oh, ooh / Baby, let all them voices slip away")

(Synths and beat join)

Mike: I wrote a lot of love songs about my relationship with him, because so many songs are about the beginning of love or like young love. And I wanted to write some music that was talking about how beautiful and sacred love can be, that's been around for longer, that maybe doesn't seem as dramatic, but it's just as powerful and worthy of dramatizing [laughter]. It's so easy the longer you're with someone, and the more your circumstances get better, to take it all for granted. It's not in my nature to be grateful, unfortunately. I wish it was, but my brain is just too quick that I'm never really fully caught up with what's happening. I'm always like 20 minutes ahead of myself. So I was trying to make myself be more in the moment, and be more patient, and kind, and talk about some of the more magical things that are happening, that maybe I don't pay close enough attention to sometimes.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Slip Away," by Perfume Genius, in its entirety.

("Slip Away" by PERFUME GENIUS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Perfume Genius, and to watch the "Slip Away" music video. 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 a grant from the Knight Foundation and by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. Follow Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. 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.

Mike: I think we essentially just started there, just to get the juices flowing. Sorry I just said, "Juices flowing." I want to apologize to you and everyone for saying that [laughter].

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