

Song Exploder
Phoebe Bridgers - Scott Street
Episode 153

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.

(“*Scott Street*” by *PHOEBE BRIDGERS*)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

Thao: Phoebe Bridgers is a singer-songwriter from Los Angeles. In September 2017, she released her debut album, *Stranger in the Alps*. One of the breakout songs from that album was “Scott Street,” a song Phoebe co-wrote with her drummer, Marshall Vore. In this episode, Phoebe and Marshall break down how the song went from an unfinished cassette recording, to an acoustic demo, to the finished album version.

(“*Scott Street*” by *PHOEBE BRIDGERS*)

Phoebe: I’m Phoebe Bridgers.

Marshall: This is Marshall Vore, drummer of Phoebe Bridgers.

(*Music fades out*)

Phoebe: We met in like late 2014, became fast friends, hung out every day. We started talking about music.

Marshall: I remember we were just hanging out a lot, and then you would just be having an idea or something and you’d be like, “What do you think of this?” Or I would do the same thing like, “I have this idea, what do you think of that?” And it seemed like some songs ended up coming out of that, together.

Phoebe: And so we started writing a lot of songs and, this one, it’s an idea that Marshall had.

Marshall: I like had a guitar and was sitting on Phoebe’s bed playing the chords.

(*Cassette demo guitar chords*)

Marshall: I had just got a cassette machine and I thought it was cool, so there's a cassette demo.

(Cassette demo vocals along with guitar: "Walking Scott Street, feeling like a stranger / Open heart, open container")

(Cassette demo vocals guitar)

Marshall: I just kind of had these lyrics from my phone, which were the first opening lyrics of the song. I first started writing those lyrics in 2014. I was walking from my apartment to my friend's house, and I was just singing what was happening. I grabbed my mail [laughter] on the way out. And in between us was an Arco gas station where we would buy stuff.

(Cassette demo vocals along with guitar: "Got a stack of mail and a tall can / It's a shower beer, it's a payment plan")

(Cassette demo vocals guitar)

Marshall: And that's pretty much all that there was, just a few lyrics and then a little tag that is, "Do you feel ashamed?"

(Cassette demo vocals along with guitar: "Do you feel ashamed?")

(Cassette demo vocals guitar)

Phoebe: And I like fell in love with it, but it was really only like half a song.

Marshall: It was like something that I would play around the house what little bit was there, and then it wasn't until much later that Phoebe sort of threw a lasso around it and made it into something usable. You grabbed a guitar and we just hashed the rest of it out.

(Second demo acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: I like made up completely different chords that I thought were cooler.

(Second demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Walking Scott Street, feeling like a stranger / Open heart, open container")

(Second demo acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: And then that tag, the “Do you feel ashamed” lyric, you were kind of thinking of that as like a pre-chorus and then it would like open up into some big chorus. But I told him not to. I really like songs where it makes the listener kind of fill in the blanks. And I just felt like some big chorus would italicize the subtext in a way that I didn’t like. And then, he was like, “Okay, okay, but just like hear me out,” [laughter] and played it again. It was like, “Do you feel ashamed when you hear my name,” and then he goes,

(Second demo acoustic guitar ends)

Phoebe: “I hope you, doooooo!” [Laughter] So ridiculous. And that was exactly what I meant. Any commentary on what was just said felt like completely unnecessary and actually kind of took away from the point to me. So I like kind of stopped you from like over-writing it.

Marshall: Definitely. There was a lot of like moments [laughter] that were not very understated or pretty. But the “Do you feel ashamed” lyric comes from a place when I had this like really crazy time in my life. I was 25, I played a show and I was standing by the curb waiting for the van to pick me up. And then a fight broke out, and my leg was broken. Basically, these guys tripped over me and they snapped my leg in half and everybody ran away. So there was like an entire year where I didn’t walk or play music or do anything. And I just started dating someone.

(Second demo acoustic guitar)

Marshall: And so they more or less took care of me through the time that it took me to go through this whole leg thing. And I remember during that time like not seeing any of my real friends and being very upset, and I remember the person I was dating telling me like, “Your friends aren’t here for you, your friends don’t love you.” And years later when me and this person broke up and I would talk to my friends, they were trying to see me the whole time. This person was telling them like Marshall doesn’t want to see you. And I remember waking up to this thing, that like this person did love me, but they were also working against me. And so, I just wonder if they’re ashamed of that kind of thing, and if they’ve grown up.

(Second demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: “Do you feel ashamed / When you hear my name?”)

(Second demo acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: So then we wrote the second verse. We wanted it to be a dialogue.

Marshall: Phoebe made that verse into like a conversation that you would be having with someone from your past.

Phoebe: It's so sad and weird to play catch up with someone who was so intimately involved in your life for so long. And it was entirely imagined, it was like, what would a conversation like that be, what would the person be asking.

(Second demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I asked you, "How is your sister? / heard she got her degree" / I said, "That makes me feel old" / You said, "What does that make me?"")

Marshall: Running into somebody that you spent all that time with and realizing that the world is changed and it's not the same world that it was even a few years ago, is a really heavy thing to deal with.

(Second demo vocals with acoustic guitar: "And how is playing drums?" / You said, "It's too much shit to carry")

(Second demo fades out)

Phoebe: I made the demo kind of to map out what my idea of the structure was. And I played it for my producer, Tony, because I like really wanted to put it on my record. And he was like, "This isn't a real song." [Laughter] And I like, a couple weeks later, was like, "I'm going to just experiment, I'm going to play him the exact same thing again, because I think this is a real song, and I think it is good." And I did, and he got really excited and like did not remember me showing it to him for the first time when he didn't like it. So then we went in to record, and started with guitar.

(Acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: The acoustic guitar is a J45 that Glen Campbell owned. Glen Campbell's a country singer from the sixties and seventies. It's like my favorite guitar that exists in the entire universe. It's like so dead like it doesn't ring at all. And that's what's so great about it to me.

(*Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Walking Scott Street, feeling like a stranger"*)

(*Acoustic guitar ends*)

(*Vocals: "With an open heart, open container"*)

Phoebe: I love doubling my vocals. 85% of the music I listened to was Elliott Smith,
("St. Ides Heaven" by ELLIOTT SMITH)

Phoebe: and he does it so aggressively, and I loved it.

("St. Ides Heaven" by ELLIOTT SMITH)

Phoebe: I love the quality that it gives a voice.

(*Doubled vocals: "Spending money, and I earned it / When I'm lonely, that's when I'll burn it"*)

Phoebe: It takes some of the emotion out of my voice, which can be melodramatic sometimes, especially when talking about my feelings which I do often. And so, it was a way to take it out of that zone and be more expressive in like the production.

(*Vocals along with electric guitar: "There's helicopters over my head / Every night when I go to bed"*)

Phoebe: Harrison, my guitar player, came in and played on it. And he did the helicopter noises.

Marshall: What Harry was doing was he was playing a chord, with the volume down on the guitar, turning up the volume and shaking the neck as hard as he could, so it was going [mimics warble sound].

(*Electric guitar warble*)

Phoebe: We were like, "Maybe that's stupid, if we make it sound like a helicopter." And then we ended up doing it, and I loved it. I have a theory that the jokes you make in the studio are actually just kind of the best ideas, but you're just shoving them aside, or if you get made fun of for having the idea, you can claim

it was a joke. Whatever your joke idea is, is probably just a genius idea you're a little nervous about.

(Acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: When we went to record drums, we were like, "Oh man, it should come in on the weird off-beat where I say drums."

(Drums)

(Vocals join: "asked you, "How is playing drums?")

Phoebe: And we're like, "Maybe that's stupid."

(Vocals along with drums: "Said, "It's too much shit to carry")

Phoebe: And it ended up being my favorite thing about the song.

(Drums)

Phoebe: I love the idea of something kind of turning into another universe, like you set one tone, and then the tone just like completely shifts.

(Optigan drums)

Marshall: Those are the Optigan drums. A Optigan was a toy piano. I think it was made by Mattel if I remember correctly. And it has these like discs that go in it, but they're made of like laminated paper, and it's all floppy. And you put them in, and they have different sounds on them. So you can select just the drums from these discs, and you can adjust the tempo until it kind of grooves with your song. And if you put them in upside down they play backwards.

(Optigan drums)

(Optigan drums fade out)

(Strings)

Phoebe: Rob Moose did all the strings on my record. He plays with Paul Simon, he plays all over Bon Iver stuff. It was important to keep it sparse at the beginning to me.

I am a real sucker for a big build song. All I had to say was, “Yeah I want it to be really sparse in the beginning and then open up.” And so yeah, we just like put Rob in front of a microphone and he did a bunch of stuff that we really liked.

(Strings end)

Phoebe: The squeaky weird string hits are Rob’s specialty.

(Strings squeaks)

Phoebe: I really gravitate towards people who have a completely different go-to thing than I do, like an instinctual thing that’s just so far out for me. And Rob’s definitely like that, like it’s just intuitive for him to do stuff like that.

(Strings squeaks)

Phoebe: And then Tony Berg, the producer of my record, told me I needed an outro. So I like went into the vocal booth once to sing the melody.

(Melody)

Phoebe: And then a bunch of people went in a different time to sing harmonies.

(Harmonies)

Phoebe: We layered it on top of each other,

(Melody along with harmonies and acoustic guitar)

Phoebe: It was like this very victorious feeling thing.

(Melody along with harmonies and acoustic guitar end)

Phoebe: Tony handed us each like a cowbell, a bike bell, all these crazy toys because he loves the Beatles.

(Various high pitched sounds)

Marshall: And he was like giving us these seed pods that had dried out and was like, “Shake these near the microphone,”

(Shaker)

Marshall: "and then take this train whistle and blow the train whistle every other time."

(Train whistle joins)

(Train whistle ends)

Phoebe: When we were done recording the outro, and it was so giant and like all the crazy bells and whistles and everybody singing together, it was just this very emotional day, we were listening to the rough, and Tony twirled around his producer chair with a single tear rolling down his face, and [laughter] he said, "It's as if you're looking back on your life, and it was just a failure." [Laughter]

Marshall: Which was his version of a compliment [laughter].

(Shaker fades out)

Phoebe: Marshall, who had never sung a harmony before, sang a harmony on this recording.

(Marshall's vocals: "Do you feel ashamed")

Phoebe: Marshall never really sang until we met, and then when we started singing together, our voices started kind of sounding exactly the same, so I love that quality on the recording.

(Marshall's and Phoebe's vocals along with acoustic guitar: "When you hear my name?")

(Acoustic guitar)

Marshall: When you sing something like, "Do you feel ashamed when you hear my name," that can mean so many different things to so many people. But for me, I think particularly about this one person and this one really bizarre surreal time in my life that I went into as a younger guy and I came out of it all as an adult.

Phoebe: The craziest feeling ever is being in a relationship that's like all-consuming, it's your whole life for years, and then just the wake of that. It's so crazy that people can be completely estranged from their exes after being best friends for years,

that someone would think of you and feel ashamed of what happened, and that's just the only feeling that's left.

(*Shaker and electric guitar join*)

Phoebe: But now my association with this song is like singing it every night and listening through other people's ears. A highlight of the show for me is like people singing along at the end. What I like about this song is it's not really telling you why you're sad, it doesn't say a lot about what you're supposed to feel and I'm just so glad people got it.

(*Music ends*)

Thao: And now, here is "Scott Street," by Phoebe Bridgers, in its entirety.

(*"Scott Street" by PHOEBE BRIDGERS*)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Phoebe Bridgers and her bandmate Marshall Vore. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Next time on Song Exploder, Mumford & Sons.

(*"Beloved" by MUMFORD & SONS*)

Song Exploder was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Special thanks to Morgan Travis and Kenny Becker. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. 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 find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

(*"Beloved" by MUMFORD & SONS fades*)