

Song Exploder
Raphael Saadiq - Kings Fall
Episode 170

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.

("Kings Fall" by RAPHAEL SAADIQ)

Thao: This episode contains explicit language. Raphael Saadiq is a Grammy-winning songwriter, producer, and artist from Oakland, California. He was the lead singer of the legendary '90s R&B group, Tony! Toni! Toné!. And as a producer, he's worked with D'Angelo, TLC, Whitney Houston, Solange Knowles, Mary J. Blige, and John Legend. In August 2019, Raphael released his fifth solo album, *Jimmy Lee*, which is named for his late older brother. In this episode, he breaks down a song from the album he made with his nephew, Dylan Wiggins, called "Kings Fall."

("Kings Fall" by RAPHAEL SAADIQ)

Raphael: My name is Raphael Saadiq.

(Music fades out)

Raphael: I actually wrote this song with my nephew, Dylan Wiggins.

Dylan: Rafael's my uncle, but I call Rafael, Ray. Everybody in my family, they all call him Ray. What's up, I'm Dylan Wiggins, AKA Sir Dylan from Oakland, California.

Raphael: He's been living in Los Angeles now for maybe like six or seven years and we work on a lot of music together, and he actually brought me the track, "Kings Fall."

Dylan: The first idea that came to me before I made that song was just this idea of these chords I had on the guitar.

(Guitar chords)

Dylan: I was going for, I would say, a Otis Redding vibe, something that just sounded like my grandfather's music or just something from back in the time. You know chords that were going to draw emotion.

(Guitar chords)

Dylan: And then I ended up recording like a solo guitar to it.

(Guitar solo along with guitar chords)

(Guitar chords fade out)

Dylan: And then reversed that lead guitar I did.

(Reversed lead guitar)

Dylan: That's just to create the feeling of like falling.

(Reversed lead guitar along with guitar chords)

(Guitars end)

Dylan: After the chords, came the drums.

(Drums)

Dylan: I have like a loop folder that was given to me by Ali Shaheed Muhammad from Tribe Called Quest, the legends. And it has a lot of drum loops that sound spectacular and it's just hundreds of them. And I think they were sampled from vinyl. So I chopped a sample up and then just tried to make it feel as real as possible and as human as possible.

(Drums)

Dylan: Just really slowed it down and made it sound like old school.

(Drums end)

Dylan: And then the electric sitar.

(Electric sitar)

Dylan: It's strung up like a regular guitar, but at the bottom they have these pick up things. It rubs the strings against the metal and it kind of creates this "tang" sound.

(Sitar ends)

Dylan: And that was the last thing that was on the song.

Raphael: When Dylan brought me the track, it was called "Kings Fall."

Dylan: I don't think that's ever happened before where I like named the beat before the lyrics. But to me, it just sounded like something at the end of a, I won't say a movie, but like the end of something where the King is like, you know, "I've done all I can do, but like this shit is going down." And even the chords are all going downwards.

(Instrumental)

Raphael: So he played it for me, and you know, it was right up my alley. I was very excited because my record is a little darker than most records and little eerier feeling, little vibe, and my record is titled *Jimmy Lee*. So Jimmy Lee is my brother who had drug addiction. So my record's about addiction and so it fit because it shows like very strong people in the beginning, but, you know, drug addiction is something you can fall from, you know. No matter how big or strong you are or beautiful you are. So I was like, "Yeah, I got to work with this. We got to do something with this."

(Music ends)

Raphael: It took me maybe one week before I started writing melodies and thinking about what I was going to talk about or sing about because I really love storytelling and I had a lot of things in mind. I was sort of talking about a friend of mine who has some addiction issues too. So I sort of had a guideline to read into when I was singing the song.

(First verse vocals: "I wake up, I call the man / To see what's in the man's hands / He comes by and drops it off / To let me know how much the pills cost")

Raphael: The song is really about not the guy who's on drugs, it's about the dealer, the person around you that makes it available. You know, just like wants to keep you high, and wants to keep you down and it's about the supplier.

(Chorus vocals: "The supplier, my provider, and all those things")

Raphael: That person that provides and supplies can sort of hide in the dark a lot and not be mentioned when everybody's getting high. They come in the middle of the night, they're always smiling. They always sneaky. So I just wanted to give the attention to that, that was my thing. So my play on words was just to say, "I want you to be, but that's what you are anyway, but we're just exposing it."

(Chorus vocals along with guitar chords: "I want you to be my / The supplier, my provider, and all those things / I want you to be my / My provider and supplier and all those things, and all those things / I want you to be my")

Dylan: He will literally be cutting vocals at like 2 o'clock in the morning with no engineer at all, and nobody at the studio but him.

Raphael: My vocal session was just one session. I knew that I wanted to be sort of gritty, and direct, and like a lot of edge on it.

(First verse vocals along with drums: "My eyes roll and I'm scared / I find myself lyin' back in the bed / I'm hiding out, I keep the blinds closed / I could see witches flyin' everywhere")

Raphael: The lyrics are, "I could see witches flying everywhere." Just talking about the state of mind you're in, when you're indulging in chemicals or whatever kind of pills or whatever your drug of choice is. When you're high and you're hallucinating, you're seeing things. You think people chasing you, people are following you. And you wish that it was a bad dream.

(Panting)

Raphael: The breaths in this song, the panting is, you know, waking up out of your sleep in a cold sweat and just being scared. You don't know what happened, you know, just what's going on in my life? So I wanted to put those breaths behind the dope fiend reference.

(Chorus vocals along with breaths and guitar chords: "Even when I'm clean / I'm still a dope fiend / Everyone is always trying tell me something")

(Guitar chords)

Raphael: "Even when I'm clean, I'm still a dope fiend." I'm also talking about people who are not on an actual chemical drug, maybe it's food, maybe it's sugar, maybe it's sex, maybe it's anger, you know, just something that you can't get away so I'm not leaving out the regular human, you know, we all have addictions.

(Chorus vocals full track: "I wake up, I feel things crawlin' / But nobody wants to see a strong man fallin'")

Raphael: At the very end, it cuts off with this doorbell.

(Doorbell)

Raphael: So when you hear the doorbell at the end, it's like the supplier and ringing the doorbell to bring you drugs, bring you pills. I wanted to sort of subliminally remind people, you know, every time your doorbell rings doesn't mean it's a good ring or somebody there to help you. The providers, sometime there for, with bad intentions.

(Doorbell)

Raphael: When I did that, I knew I was done.

Dylan: After I sent it to him, I was just kind of like who knows what's going to happen. And then one time I come to the studio and he's like, "Did I play you this song?" and I was like, "No." Then he played it for me and I was like, "Wow." I wasn't hearing that on there. I was hearing something a lot softer, but when he came with that energy I was like, "Dang, this took that super sad song to like a level of emotion that it needed to go to, to really be something."

(Instrumental)

Raphael: You know, for me talking about addiction, I been around it, growing up with my brother Jimmy Lee, he was a bit older than me so from the time I knew him, he was already addicted to drugs. He was pretty much, curiosity kills the cat. He tried a chemical, he never was able to relieve himself from it. It's been laced in my music for some time, but this is the first time I went 100% directly to it. And you know, that was my take on it.

Thao: And now, here is “Kings Fall,” by Raphael Saadiq, in its entirety.

(“Kings Fall” by RAPHAEL SAADIQ)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Raphael Saadiq and Dylan Wiggins. You’ll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder is made by Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, Thao Nguyen. I’m guest hosting for the year, sitting in for Hrishikesh. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, you can see his portrait of Raphael Saadiq on the Song Exploder website or Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can follow me @thaogetstaydown. I’m Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.