

Song Exploder
Robyn - Honey
Episode 167

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.

("Honey" by ROBYN)

Hrishikesh: Robyn is a Swedish singer and songwriter. Her first album came out in 1995, when she was just 16 years old. It went platinum in the US, and double-platinum in Sweden. Since then, she's been nominated for five Grammys and started her own record label. But there was an eight-year gap between Robyn's album *Body Talk*, which came out in 2010, and her most recent album, *Honey*, which came out last October. *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Pitchfork* all named *Honey* one of the best albums of 2018. For Song Exploder, Robyn breaks down the song "Honey," the title track from the album. The first time the public heard the song was in a 2017 episode of the HBO show, *Girls*, but that's not the final version that was eventually released on the album. In this episode, Robyn traces the long history of how she made "Honey," a song that *The New York Times* called "her masterpiece."

("Honey" by ROBYN)

Robyn: My name is Robyn.

(Music fades out)

Robyn: Me and Markus, who's in my band, we had a soundcheck and he had brought this little Casio synthesizer that I was messing around with. I don't know if you've heard those little Casio's but they sound amazing, they sound like video games. And so, he showed me this thing we could hold two buttons, and there was something wrong with that particular Casio so that when you held these two buttons, it would glitch so that you could like separate the baseline out of these pre-recorded little beats that were in the synthesizer. And I did that with a waltz beat. It sounds really cool, just on its own, it sounds like this.

(Waltz beat)

Robyn: It's not an even bassline because it's a waltz. And something about that just felt really groovy to me.

(Waltz beat fades out)

Robyn: I always love when music does that, when it does something unexpected and changes the way you think about rhythm. And then I just kept that beat. We recorded it and I kept it and we started making songs with it, me and Markus, just tried different things. And I didn't feel like it was exactly what I wanted it to be and I just kept it. This was like maybe 2013, maybe. And then when I started writing again for this album in like 2015 maybe, I brought the beat out again.

(Waltz beat)

Robyn: I was looking for like new ways to sing rhythmically because I was feeling kind of claustrophobic, coming out of the music I had done before like, I mean I love the music, that wasn't the problem. It was more like rhythmically I wanted to like feel freer.

(Waltz beat ends)

Robyn: I guess that was what I was working out during those months when I was in the studio by myself, just like rewire my own way of relating to rhythm. So I was in my studio in my house in the basement of the building where I live in Stockholm. And I was trying like lots of different sounds and rhythms, freestyling on this beat, and I did for like two months or something. I would do it as an exercise because I knew there was a song in there but I, it was almost like I was breaking it down like, trying to disintegrate or like maybe get to the core or something. And then I remember one day, I just found my way into a melody that felt much more natural than anything I had written on it before which was [sings a melody, "but down in the deep the honey is sweeter]." When I was writing this song, I think the feeling that I was going for was to find like some kind of healing for myself, a place where I could calm myself down. And that felt really good when I sang it so I kept it, I recorded it and I kept it. And then I took it with me to the studio where I was writing with Klas when I started writing together with other people. Klas is my longtime collaborator, he's almost like second member of the band Robyn [laughter]. The person that I made music with more than anyone the last 10 years. I knew I was going to work with him for this album. But it took a while until I was ready to collaborate again. It was really exciting to collaborate on something that I had already put together. It gave me a lot of freedom to kind

of describe my ideas in this more like, protected way. Yeah so me and Klas, we wrote the chorus together.

(Vocals: "No, you're not gonna get what you need / But baby, I have what you want / Come get your honey")

Robyn: And we wrote the words for the verse together as well. I knew that I wanted the verse to be this abstract description of a feeling.

(Vocals: "Every color and every taste / Every breath that whispers your name / It's like emeralds on the pavement")

Robyn: It's not me saying, "I feel sad and happy at the same time, and I feel hot, and I want to have sex with you." It's not that, it's you know, it's like I wanted to feel free but also I wanted the person listening to the music to find their own space where they could like associate more freely about pleasure, sensuality, peace of mind, those kind of things.

(Vocals: "Can you open up to the pleasure? / Suck it up inside like a treasure / Let the brightest place be your passion / Let go of your doubt, say yes / Let it soak up into the flesh / Never had this kind of nutrition")

Robyn: And then this whole other process started where we started working on the production.

(Beat)

Robyn: Me and Klas made a version of "Honey" that was used in the last episode of *Girls*, the TV series. Because I, basically Lena Dunham asked me for music, and I sent her these demos and she wanted to use "Honey."

("Honey" Girls version)

Robyn: And I was very happy that she wanted to use it but I also knew that it was not finished.

("Honey" Girls version ends)

Robyn: And so I went back to the demo, and I started arranging it again with, you know, the song already written with me and Klas. And went back and I took out his

production and I started working on that. And then I asked Joseph Mount to come in and work on the production. He has a band called Metronomy that is one of my favorite bands. And I've listened to his music for a long time. And I got in touch with him, see if he wanted to work with me and we spent a week or so in the studio very early on. And he started playing around with these strings. And he kind of stripped a lot of other things away as well so he kept the vocal and the Casio.

(Strings along with Casio beat)

Robyn: Joseph is so sparse and minimalist in a way.

(Vocals along with strings and Casio beat: "No, you're not gonna get what you need / But baby, I have what you want / Come get your honey")

Robyn: And that, for a long time, was like going to be the finished version.

(Vocals along with strings and Casio beat: "No, you're not gonna get what you need (you need) / But baby, I have what you want (what you want) / Come get your honey")

Robyn: And then Joseph changed his mind, he was like, "I don't think this is what we should do," and then we went back into the studio together, me and Joseph and Klas. Basically Joseph took all the things that we had done, the strings, and the chords from Markus, all the things that we'd done, and he created this sample that we started calling "the sauce."

(Sample)

Robyn: We used this filter this really fun, but stupid house filter and he kind of made like this underwater feeling, you know, of all those things.

(Sample with filter)

Robyn: I think we wanted it to feel like you're underwater but then you look down and you're like, there's thousands of meters down to the bottom of the sea, you know, this feeling of like something opening underneath. Mmm.

(Sample with filter)

Robyn: But I felt like, you know, the sauce was amazing but it's so undefined, and so I just wanted there to be more hints of like the actual chord structure. We just needed more melody, we needed like a hook in there. This like really simple melody that leaves a lot of space and like a lot up to the imagination.

(Melody along with filter and kick drum)

(Melody along with kick drum)

(Kick drum)

Robyn: I was really inspired by all this dance music that I've grown up listening to, basically music made for clubs. And that kind of music, it doesn't

(Filtered sample joins)

Robyn: really have a beginning and an end and that, you know, chorus and the normal song structure the way a lot of pop music does. It relates to the dramaturgy of a song in a totally different way. I think that's what dance music is about, is about putting you in a place where you're in your body dancing, without thinking about when it's going to end. That it's like more about the moment, and how it makes you feel.

(Music ends)

Robyn: So the demo that I made doesn't sound like the thing we released that much at all. But there's a rhythm in the bassline that's still there.

(Bass)

Robyn: That has a little bit of that first Casio. The Casio goes [mimics the rhythm of the Casio while snapping]. So we kind of kept that kind of thing. And the other one that's more like an arpeggio

(Arpeggiated bass)

Robyn: was a way to create this like galloping rhythm together with the kick drum.

(Arpeggiated bass along with kick drum)

Robyn: And it's kind of nice with the bassline as well.

(Two basslines and kick drum)

Robyn: I think on this record, I started to sing in a different way than I had done before. I didn't want it to feel pushed or pressured in any way, I wanted it to just feel relaxed and soft and I started singing differently. And I started like discovering new kind of things that I could do when I just relaxed.

(Vocals: "Mmm and the sun sets on the water / But down in the deep the current is stronger")

Robyn: So me and Klas recorded the vocals for this song like three times. You know, I thought I had relaxed as much as I should have, and then I kind of take it even one step further and I relaxed even more. And I was like, "Wow, it's sounding even better," and then we did it a third time because I knew that like, "Oh I can take this even further." It was really interesting, I think, to discover that. A lot of times, it's not about pushing harder, it's about going softer.

(Vocals: "Mmm and the waves come in and they're golden / But down in the deep the honey is sweeter")

Robyn: When I listen to the song, even though I've heard this many times and sung it so many times, the line that still gets me is the line, "But down in the deep the honey is sweeter," because there's something about that that talks about, for me at least, like how when you kind of face yourself or if, you know, dig deep into yourself, there's like a sweetness that comes with that digging or the depth or the pain sometimes of like going deep into things. Not saying that it's a reward because, you know, when you go through difficult things in life, you don't always feel like it makes sense or that it's necessary or that you want to do it. But I think when I was writing this song, I was coming out of something that had been quite painful and I knew that I had learned things from that. And that I had maybe also been able to kind of come closer to something that felt like me, something that felt honest. I think anyone who has gone through difficult things maybe can understand what I mean. And so the singing was also a part of like the healing process for me.

(Vocals: "No, you're not gonna get what you need / But baby, I have what you want / Come get your honey")

Robyn: When it was time to mix, I had this idea that I wanted to give the mix to Philippe Zdar.

Hrishikesh: Philippe Zdar was one half of the hugely influential French dance duo, Cassius, and a Grammy-winning mixer and producer.

Robyn: Because I just felt like this song needs to be mixed as a club track.

(Philippe Zdar's mix of "Honey")

Robyn: And Philippe was known for doing these amazing tape delay takes where he would put the vocals through a tape delay, and that's what you can hear there in the mix.

(Tape delay)

Robyn: I think it's the first time in my life that I got a mix back that was good from the first time I heard it.

(Vocals mixed by Philippe Zdar: "No, you're not gonna get what you need (you need) / But baby, I have what you want (what you want) / Come get your honey baby")

Robyn: I remember just getting stuck on the word "honey." I don't know why I was so obsessed with that word. I thought it was funny that it meant honey the way you call your lover, and this weird kind of interesting, but little bit disgusting substance that bees make.

Hrishikesh: Is there an image in your head of who the song is being sung to?

Robyn: Mmm yeah.

Hrishikesh: Is it a specific person?

Robyn: Mmhm.

Hrishikesh: Does that person know that you were thinking of them?

(Filtered sample)

Robyn: Mmhm.

Robyn: I think the intention of “Honey” is like really good, something I feel really happy about, you know. Happy that I found the space and that I explored it. I think my perspective on it has changed like several times, you know, but that’s how it should be. I think, I still think that it’s a healing song and I also think that when Philippe Zdar, who mixed the song, died a month ago that also changed it for me, like right now the song is like very, very emotional again because he’s not here anymore. And you know, I’m sure it’s going to change again, you know, it’s like that’s how it works with music and I think the experience of making this song, you know, all the way for me like starting these early demos with Markus and then on my own, and then spending all this time writing it and really trying to define this feeling, and then working with Joseph and Klas and like re-doing the vocals and the production like letting it really take the time it needed to get where I wanted to be was really amazing. I’m really happy that I was able to follow that through the whole way. Just being able to record this freedom that I felt that the song was trying to describe. Mmm.

Hrishikesh: Thank you so much.

Robyn: Thank you.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Honey,” by Robyn, in its entirety.

(“Honey” by ROBYN)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Robyn, her music and her collaborators on “Honey.” You’ll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, along with producer Christian Koons. Sitting in for me as guest host this year has been Thao Nguyen. She’ll be back next episode. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, and Nick Song is our production assistant. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated collective of independent, creative podcasts. You can learn about all our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.