

Song Exploder
Sasha Sloan - Until It Happens To You
Episode 203

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.

I've been thinking about grief a lot recently, because my mom passed away a few months ago. Just a few weeks before that happened, I recorded this interview with Sasha Sloan, about her song "Until It Happens to You," which, as you'll hear, is about grief, but also the distance between those who have lost someone and those who haven't. When we did the interview I was in the second category, but now, I'm in the first one, and for me making this episode has been an interesting way for me to retrace my steps as I crossed from one side of the divide to the other. Anyway, I just wanted to mention that. But here we go.

("Until It Happens To You" by SASHA SLOAN)

Hrishikesh: Sasha Sloan is a singer and songwriter, originally from Boston, but now based in Nashville. She put out her debut album, *Only Child*, last year. Before that, she'd written songs for artists like Katy Perry, John Legend, and Charli XCX, and she's been a featured guest vocalist on songs by electronic artists Odesza and Kygo. Sasha made her album with her boyfriend, producer Henry Allen, aka King Henry, whose other production credits include songs by Beyoncé and Diplo, so they are kind of a music power couple. In this episode, Sasha, along with Henry, tells the story of making her song "Until It Happens To You."

Sasha: My name is Sasha Sloan.

(Music fades out)

Sasha: When it comes to writing, I always start with a title. My boyfriend and I have a close friend, and he had a cousin who was like a sister to him, and we hung out with her a lot. She was in her early 30s and one day she was diagnosed with leukemia and a couple months later, she passed away. Henry and I were very shaken up by it, and just sitting and talking, and you know we were like, "You'll never really know what it's like until it happens to you," because my boyfriend and I had never lost someone that close to us. We've both been to funerals but it was kind of, you know, at a distance, and it was just one of those things where I wanted to say, "Hey, I know what you're going through right now," but I couldn't.

I could only say, “I can only imagine what that feels like.” And it didn’t feel like enough, that’s kind of what inspired the title.

(Acoustic guitar)

Sasha: That’s my friend Danny Silverstein. Danny came over to hang out and we were talking about song titles and I was like, “I have this song title called “Until It Happens To You.” And you know when I explained the concept to him, it really struck a chord with him and we went to the studio and Danny had this guitar part that was really beautiful.

(Acoustic guitar continues)

Sasha: I love writing with Danny and Henry because they're great guitar players. I can play piano but I'm always usually more inspired by like a great guitar riff. So I felt super inspired by that, and the title “Until It Happens To You” felt like it really fit with that guitar part. For me, titles have to find their partner first in order for me to write them. It’s so much easier for me to write a melody when I have a concept that I’m starting with. It’s much harder for me to work off of melodies and then fill in lyrics afterwards. You know there are songs where it takes painstakingly long to find a good melody or a good lyric, and with this song, it kinda all just flowed into each other.

(Acoustic guitar along with lead vocals: “Somebody loses their somebody every day / But you’ll never really know what it’s like / ‘Til you wake up to some real bad news / You’ll never really know how it feels / ‘Til it happens to you / No, you’ll never really know what it’s like / ‘Til it happens to you”)

Sasha: Sometimes it’s really hard to be simple without being boring. Not simple, but to the point, and you know not overthink the melody and not overthink the structure, and just let the song be what it’s supposed to be. So Danny just laid the guitar in and I think it probably took us like two hours to write, and yeah that’s what we did that night.

(Acoustic guitar ends)

Sasha: After I write a song, I listen to the demo about 400 times [laughter] and then for me, it’s super important that I step away from it. So I don’t think I heard the song for like two or three months after my epic listening session. And then you know I was thinking about what I was gonna put on the album and I was going through

old songs 'cause I had been writing a lot since then. That song came up in my demo folder and I was like, "oh man there's really something to this." But Henry, also known as King Henry, is my boyfriend / producer.

Henry: My name is Henry.

Sasha: He was like, you know it sounds a little like sweet right now. It sounds like a lullaby.

(Acoustic guitar along with first verse vocals: "You can have a friend get their heart broken / You can be there when they need it the most, but / You won't be the one falling off the deep end")

Sasha: He was like how do we take it out of this folk guitar world, and make it more of like an emotional rollercoaster.

Henry: It's hard because a lot of times it's better for a song that's emotional like that and really like important to just be very simple. But I just kinda wanted it to tell a story in the music as much as the lyrics.

Sasha: But I was really attached to the demo. I had like the worst demoitis ever and I was like "come on, I love this guitar part." He's like, "let's just take the a cappella and start from scratch and see what happens."

(Acoustic guitar along with first verse vocals: "You can have a friend lose somebody close / And you can be there when they need it the most, but / You won't be the one having trouble sleeping")

Henry: He started playing piano under it, and then he started playing you know electric guitar under it. Nothing really felt right until we found the Juno sound.

(Juno synth)

(First verse vocals join Juno: "You can have a friend lose somebody close / And you can be there when they need it the most, but / You won't be the one having trouble sleeping")

Sasha: At first, I really hated it. It was so different and I missed the rhythm of the guitar underneath. I was like, "Henry I really just don't think this is going in the right direction. We're gonna need to change it back to guitar." But the understanding

that Henry and I have between each other is he's like, "ok well give me like one more try."

Henry: Luckily she's very down for me to just experiment and I'll basically tell her like, I know this is sounding insane but just let me sit here for like two or three hours and then if you hate it after that, we'll just go back.

Sasha: The first time Henry ever shows me something I usually don't like it. I just have to trust in the process and that's what I did. You know, if you don't trust each other, then I should have just made the album myself.

(Juno synth ends)

Sasha: From there, we just kinda started playing with, well how do we make this move? How do we make this pick up? And Henry started playing that guitar part that comes in on the second verse.

(Acoustic guitar with Juno)

Sasha: Once I heard that guitar part come in, I was like okay I can get behind this.

(Acoustic guitar and Juno along with second verse vocals: "You can do your best, call 'em every night / Listen to 'em say, say they're alright / But you know there's a chance they don't really mean it")

Sasha: I actually started to love the space that the Juno created in the beginning of the song. And then you know the slow gradual build with that guitar part.

(Electric guitar plays along with acoustic guitar)

Sasha: I think that's when he discovered the drums.

(Drums along with electric guitar and acoustic guitar)

(Solo drums)

Sasha: Those drums that you're hearing weren't written for the song at all. Henry and I had just worked with this band, LANY. We did their record together that just came out. I wrote a lot of it, Henry produced a lot of it and they had this awesome drummer, Jake Goss. Jake was just messing around on the drum set

one day, and Henry was like “oh that’s really cool, I’m gonna record it.” And then somehow he found it in his archives and it was the exact same tempo as “Until It Happens To You.”

(Acoustic guitar along with electric guitar, drums and lead vocals: “You’ll never really know how it feels / ‘Til it happens to you”)

Sasha: For me, it sounds so nostalgic. You know, I grew up listening to Snow Patrol and Arcade Fire. And it kind of has that element to it, which I die for and it was also very inspired by Explosions in the Sky.

(Full demo ends)

Sasha: Once Henry dialed in those drums, Henry just found these really crazy sounds.

(Sound effect with reverb)

Sasha: It sounds like a dying whale to me, but I love it.

Henry: I’ll use a granulator a lot of the time.

Hrishikesh: A granulator is basically a kind of sampler that uses granular synthesis. So it takes a sample and then slices it up into tiny sonic bits. And then plays those bits back, overlaying and crossfading them on top of each other to make these sorts of soundscapes. And in this case, Henry is using a piece of Sasha’s voice as the sample that he’s feeding into the granulator.

Henry: Honestly, I think it doesn’t sound that good on a lot of things, but the tone and texture of Sasha’s voice just works really well because it’s so like clean and soft, so it really like lends itself to using it in a granulator.

(Piano stem)

Sasha: We went out to a craft store, we bought a bunch of felts and then we took the top of the piano off and we put felt where the keys hit. And it created this muted sound. I grew up like playing more jazz piano, everything I did was always very complicated and I had to scale it back. I think I just fell in love with that piano part because it’s so simple.

(A cappella group vocals: "You can do your best, call 'em every night / Listen to 'em say, say they're alright")

Sasha: For me, I'm a sucker for harmonies and I always have been. But there aren't that many harmonies in this song. You know, it would have been really easy to just throw harmonies on this whole thing. But if you're deprived of harmonies, and then you finally hear one, it's like, ah!

(A cappella group vocals with an extra layer of harmony: "You can do your best, call 'em every night / Listen to 'em say, say they're alright / But you know there's a chance they don't really mean it / Somebody loses their somebody everyday")

Sasha: The woman we know who passed away from leukemia, one of her very close family members posted on instagram, "Somebody loses their somebody everyday." And I was tearing up, that hit me the most. I think that is the most important lyric in the song.

(Piano along with vocals: "You'll never really know how it feels / 'Til it happens to you")

Sasha: This song is almost me talking to myself, saying you'll never really know what it's like until it happens to you. But what I'm really saying is, I'll never really know what it's like, until it happens to me. Until I experience a loss like that.

(Strings)

Sasha: Those strings were played by our friend, Jameson. We sent the song over to Jameson, and we were like, "hey if you hear anything, just let us know." And he sent back these parts and I actually remember Henry and I just sitting there going, "woah!"

(Strings blossom into multiple counterpart melodies)

Sasha: It gets so big in the end because, I know this is really cheesy, but I almost wanted it to sound like you're holding back tears, you're holding back tears and then you finally let go.

(Strings along with drums and vocals: "Somebody loses their somebody / Somebody loses their somebody / Everyday")

Hrishikesh: Do you think that by having written this song, that you're now somehow better prepared for some inevitable moment of loss in the future? Do you feel like you're better prepared for that moment?

Sasha: I do, I've been sitting with this song for months now but I put it on the speakers last night and it actually made me super emotional. It's very helpful for me to remember why I made something, and why it means a certain thing to me. The thing that really helps me is I just tell myself there isn't a single thing you're feeling that someone hasn't felt before. You can say all the cliché things to someone and you know that everyone else is saying it to them too. Pain and loss and grief are so universal, everyone goes through it in one way or another. So I think it's my own way of saying, hey it's part of life, and you're gonna have to grieve, but it's gonna be alright.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Until It Happens To You," by Sasha Sloan, in its entirety.

("Until It Happens To You" by SASHA SLOAN)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Until It Happens To You."

This episode was made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal and artwork by Carlos Lerma.

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