

**Song Exploder**  
**Slipknot - Unsainted**  
**Episode 171**

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.

*("Unsainted" by SLIPKNOT)*

Thao: This episode contains explicit language. Slipknot is a Grammy-winning metal band from Des Moines, Iowa, who first formed in 1995. They've sold over 30 million records. In this episode, guitarist Jim Root breaks down how Slipknot made the song "Unsainted," from their 2019 album *We Are Not Your Kind*.

*("Unsainted" by SLIPKNOT)*

James: My name is James Root and I play guitar in a band called Slipknot.

*(Music fades out)*

James: This song is an amalgamation of some stuff that I had written at home, some riffs, and then some jams that I do with our drummer. You know, ideas that we'd come up with while we were touring.

*(Guitar)*

James: That melody line is what birthed that tune. I always have melodies rolling through my head and I don't always, I don't really know where they come from. In order to kind of reel it all in, I would go out to Los Angeles and work with our producer, Greg Fidelman, who's very influential in helping me sort all the things in my brain out and make sense of them. Sometimes I end up forgetting them, but, you know, this is the benefit of having a Greg Fidelman and time to work in a studio because you can just sit there and you can get all these melody lines out, and eventually they evolve into a song like "Unsainted."

*(Guitar fades out)*

James: I've purposefully made it a point not to become a schooled guitar player because I feel like I would become too logical with it and think, "Oh, I can't do that because that's an augmented this," or, "That's a fifth of that and that doesn't fit with this scale," or whatever you know. I feel like it needs to be more

organic. Essentially a song will tell you where it wants to go and what it needs. You may have to, you know, give it a little push or help it here and there, but this one,

*(First guitar riff)*

James: all the riffs

*(Second guitar riff)*

James: that came in separately

*(Third guitar riff)*

James: all fit together so well.

*(All guitar riffs together)*

James: You can kind of get the gist of what something's going to be like, when Jay actually starts putting real drums to it, that sort of starts to bring everything to life.

*(Drums join)*

*(Guitars fade)*

James: We have Jay Weinberg on Drums.

*(Drum fill)*

*(Drums end)*

James: We would just do like jam sessions where Jay and I would just, he'd just play a beat and I'd just riff over the top of it

*(Guitar riff over drum beat)*

James: or I'd come up with a riff and he would just do a bunch of different beats underneath the back of it.

*(Guitar riff over a different drum beat)*

*(Drum beat)*

James: He was able to really [laughter], you know, explore the room and just try a little bit of everything, whether it's four-on-the-floor beats or blast beats

*(Blast beat)*

James: or tom beats.

*(Tom beat)*

James: But then when it came time to track, that's when we really honed in on what the parts should be.

*(Drums along with keg)*

*(Drums fade out)*

*(Keg ends)*

James: That's Clown playing the keg. Shawn Crahan. He is the percussionist and mastermind behind our artwork and the vision of Slipknot, essentially. And he knows different places to hit kegs to get different notes out of something that is a container for beer [laughter].

*(Keg)*

James: You know that's an important part of what Slipknot is, is the percussion, and depending on how he plays the keg, it can either give it kind of an industrial vibe or it can give it a really ambient, sort of dark, moody vibe.

*(Lower notes produced on the keg)*

James: It definitely adds a layer to our band that not a lot of bands have.

*(Keg ends)*

James: One of the things I've tried to achieve as a songwriter, not just a guitar player, is to be able to write songs that have different elements but to have them flow seamlessly. For the middle breakdown, we do a thing where everything drops out. It's one guitar doing like a full-step bend down.

*(First guitar)*

James: and then the other guitar comes in with a minor third harmony above it.

*(Second guitar)*

James: And then I come in with a melody half way through.

*(Third guitar)*

James: Let's harmonize the harmony [laughter]. And then it goes from this droney minor third harmony to like a major, upbeat blast beat.

*(Blast beat)*

James: I just think that's so cool, just the way that sounds together, where you'll have something switch gears 180 degrees and all of a sudden it's like you're listening to a different song. And to have that turn into a really nice smooth transition, that's kind of difficult to do [laughter], you know what I mean, and I think that's one of the things that I've gotten closer to achieving in this song and on this record.

*(Music ends)*

James: There's the section of the songwriting where you get to do what we call like the icing, you know, the frosting on the cake or whatever, and that's where you're just trying to find, you know, cool sounds. Just layering and just trying to make it more exciting.

*(Synth sound)*

James: There was a lot of synth modules in studio five. There were so many like toys we got to play with, you would've thought we were recording like *Dark Side of the Moon* or something because there was all these just crazy electronics.

*(Synth sound)*

James: That's an example of the stuff Craig and Sid do. Craig is our sampler, and he's got a computer with all kinds of samples and he's got a keyboard that he triggers samples with. And Sid is our DJ.

*(DJ scratching)*

James: We always say there's a core of the band, you know, and that's, you know, guitars, bass, drums, whatever vocals. But I don't think there, I think the core of the band is all of us in the band because it's all those things together combined that make it what it is and it wouldn't be what it is without any of that stuff, so, in my mind at least, it wouldn't make sense without it. It's not about any one guy in the band, it's about us as a whole.

*(Synth sound)*

James: Once an arrangement feels like a song and we feel like it's exciting without vocals, that's when we'll turn it over to Corey. If it sounds great already without any vocals and you're able to like kind of bob your head or rock in your chair while you're listening to it, then by the time Corey gets a hold of it, he should be able to turn it into a monster.

*(Chorus vocals: "Oh, I'll never kill myself to save my soul / I was gone, but how was I to know?")*

James: I feel like we're very lucky to have a guy like Corey because he's such a diverse vocalist.

*(Chorus vocals: "I'm finally holding on to letting go")*

James: The dude can be so melodic, he can be so heavy. You know, I'm a pretty harsh critic of what it is we do and I have a hard time looking at what we do objectively sometimes, I'm so attached to it, but that's the one time where I can kind of sit back and go, "Oh, wow."

*(First verse vocals along with bass: "I'm just weathering a rough patch / Another villain with an itch to scratch / Denial is the darkest when you live in a hole / Why does the hell make you feel so cold?")*

James: The intro of the song went through so many different phases and we spent so much time, arranging and rearranging and layering. You know, when we were touring on the last album cycle, Shawn was always saying, "I want to do a choir. I want to get like Pink Floyd The Wall, like a children's choir, you know. I have this thing in my head that I'm hearing and I want to try to get this on the next record. And the melody at the beginning of this tune,

*(Melody)*

James: was something that drew Shawn to that. He's like, "That melody line, it's just begging for that to be where we see a choir."

*(Choir)*

James: It didn't end up being a children's choir, like what Clown had envisioned in his head but when I heard the final product I kind of sat back and was like, "Wow!"

*(Choir)*

*(Corey vocals: "I'm finally holding on to letting go")*

James: I think a lot of people just by nature lean towards what they perceive to be the dark side of things. You know if you're going through a really bad breakup, what do you do? You listen to depressing music, which is ironic because you'd think you'd want to listen to something to pull you out of that depression, but as humans we tend to lean towards the darker. But if you really dissect Corey's lyrics, I think you can find a lot more hope and perseverance than there is darkness.

*(Bridge vocals: "I was more than you thought I could be / So I'm setting you free, I'm setting you free")*

James: This is about overcoming. It's about, you may have taken something away from me and you may have tried to like rip me down or tear me to shreds, but that's more of a reflection on who you are rather than who I am and I'll end up being stronger because of it.

*(Guitar)*

James: Everybody has something in their life, this like anger, this like [laughter], I'm pushing middle age but I still have this sort of teenage angst that I don't think will ever probably go away. And that's how I relate to it. It's like there's always something, man. There's always something in life, it's never going to get easier, and it's songs like this and lyrics like these that just kind of make you feel so isolated and alone. It's like, okay. I'm not the only one, somebody else has to deal with this crap too.

Thao: And now, here is "Unsainted," by Slipknot, in its entirety.

*("Unsainted" by SLIPKNOT)*

Thao: Visit [songexploder.net/slipknot](http://songexploder.net/slipknot) for more information about the band. And you'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.  
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