

**Song Exploder**  
**Solange - Cranes in the Sky**  
**Episode 94**

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

*("Cranes in the Sky" by SOLANGE)*

Hrishikesh: Solange Knowles released her first album in 2002, at the age of 16. Her third album, *A Seat at the Table*, came out in September 2016, and debuted at #1 on the Billboard charts. It's gotten widespread critical acclaim, including getting named Album of the Year by *Pitchfork* and by *Vibe*. In this episode, Solange takes apart the song "Cranes in the Sky." The story starts in 2008 when Solange was in the studio with producer Raphael Saadiq.

*("Cranes in the Sky" by SOLANGE)*

Solange: This is Solange.

*(Music fades)*

Solange: When I was actually working on *Hadley St. Dreams*, which is my second album, I thought Raphael could be the perfect person to try to help me rework some of the production on the songs. You know, we tried, but ultimately it just didn't work, but he was just such a joy to work with. I mean, he's a legend, and I learned so much just being in the room with him. And on my way out, I just asked him, you know, "Do you have any instrumentals laying around that you might want to give me?" And he gave me a CD with a few instrumentals, but it was clear they weren't going to make it for that record. I don't think I actually listened to the CD until maybe like two or three months later. And there was one that was just a sketch, just drums,

*(Drums)*

Solange: the bass,

*(Bass joins)*

Solange: and the strings.

*(Strings join)*

Solange: I immediately had this really strong reaction. I went to my hotel room, and wrote the lyrics and the melody,

*(Music ends)*

Solange: just immediately coming up with the first four lines that I tried to structure.

*(Vocals: "I tried to drink it away / I tried to put one in the air / I tried to dance it away / I tried to change it with my hair")*

Solange: At the time, I was definitely in a transitional place in my life. I was a new mother, had been with my son's father since we were 13. And so, much of my identity was grounded in *our* identity. And I also had just moved back home to Houston from Idaho. My son's father went to college there. And so, we kind of uprooted and lived in the middle of nowhere. So it was kind of my homecoming. And I had also just signed my publishing deal as a songwriter, which was a huge milestone for me. But it was this really, really hard series of things that were just like delivered, that were just like, "It's time to grow the fuck up." And there were times that I felt like, "Whoa, I'm doing what I love to do, and what I've always wanted to do. Why did things still feel so heavy? What is this weighing on me? What is this that I'm trying to work through?"

*(Vocals: "Away, away, away, away, away")*

Solange: I actually used to travel to Miami quite a bit. I wrote most of *Hadley St.* there, and also a lot of songs for my sister. Although it's known to be like this super party, fast paced city, it was really kind of like a refuge of peace for me, especially as a writer. And there was a lot of reflective time, and it became like my safe creative space. When I came back there a couple of years later, Miami was going through a surge, just like a lot of America, where developers were just creating all of these high-rises. And there was just so much real estate development at that time. And literally everywhere that I looked around had a crane [laughter] in the sky, and you could not look at a street without dozens and dozens of them. And it just felt really heavy, and that line immediately came to me.

*(Vocals: "Well it's like cranes in the sky / Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds")*

Solange: It was very literal. Miami, again being this refuge for me, this place that I also, is just creatively at my rise, at my most like pure and honest state, just the heaviness and the weightiness, and kind of even the eyesore-ness of seeing all of these cranes be so disruptive in this space that I found peace in, really kind of affected me as well. That related so strongly to the idea of trying to push through and work through, but something interrupting and something being so big in this space that you're trying to move from.

*(Strings, bass, and drums)*

Solange: I actually reached out to Rafael, and told him, you know, "I came up with something to this song, and I want to kind of further explore it. Do you have the stems for the drums, the bass, and the strings?" And he could not find the stems for the life of him. He went back and looked. At this point, it had probably been like two years. And he just was unable to find them. And there were certain chord changes that I wanted to incorporate. Just having a one track of all the sounds together, it just wasn't going to work for me [laughter]. I reached out again, asked about the stems [laughter]. He's like, "I cannot find these stems." And so, I think I got a little bit closer to realizing like, "OK, what has to be done will have to be built off of this track?"

Hrishikesh: Did you think at all about just trying to recreate it from scratch?

Solange: I did, but honestly, the texture of every sound, I felt had a sense of like warmth and spiritualness to it, that I didn't feel like could be recreated.

*(Strings, bass, and drums)*

Solange: Raphael's bassline, it still has nuances because he played it live throughout. But I think the fact that the chords do stay the same rings very true to the narrative of the song. It acts as a meditation, really. And I've had an *extremely* difficult relationship with meditating and trying to silence my brain, which is what so much of this song is about. That repetition is really able to give some structure to myself, and my brain, and my emotions. So there's definitely a sense of that, especially with the strings, and how they operate on this song.

*(Strings, bass, and drums)*

*(Vocals join: "I tried to run it away")*

*(Strings, bass, and drums fade)*

*(Vocals: "Thought then my head be feeling clearer / I traveled 70 states")*

Solange: I've lived in, I guess now, Houston, Idaho, LA, New York, and here in New Orleans. And there was a certain sense of me traveling 70 states in the physical and literal form, to find home and to find peace. But when I talk about traveling through 70 states, it's 70 states of mind to achieve this feeling, and not really being able to get there. During the hook, I added the piano scales there.

*(Piano)*

Solange: [laughter] That is so funny because even listening to it, I was about to laugh.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Solange: I played a lot of piano on this album. I still just laugh that I'm doing it. That is so funny. I have not solo'd these. For so long, I sang piano parts that I heard in my head to pianists. But sometimes rhythmically, it wasn't exactly how I heard it in my head, or it was just really hard to describe that and articulate that. And so, on this album, I was just like, "I'm just going to give it a shot," but every single time I've probably chuckled [laughter]. I guess it's kind of just a nervous mechanism, like it's literally me just kind of establishing, "I'm not a pianist."

*(Piano)*

Solange: That piano actually, I got really, really connected to. There's a little like dancehall space here in New Orleans. They have zydecos and cookouts. There was a place called Tigermen's Den. And they had this old, really janky out of tune piano in there. And I just really loved the space, and I asked for a couple of days, if I could just like work on edits for the songs. Every single time, I would say, "I'm just going to lay this piano part down, like I'm going to lay it down, and then I'm going to have whoever redo it." And I actually kept every single one of them.

*(Vocals with piano)*

*(Music ends)*

Solange: “Cranes” is the only song on the album, vocally, that I recorded in New Orleans. Once I was finished with a lot of the production in the song, I went to Jamaica actually, and I have my own little Pro Tools portable rig. So I just like packed up my whole set up, and got a little house there to record all the vocals. And the house [laughter] was really infested with roaches. I know you didn't think I was going to go there [laughter]. And I mean, it was bad. They were like coming out of my shoes, and out of cupboards, and everywhere. It was paid for, so I was like, “I have got to make this work,” but my vocals were so fucked [laughter]. They had no peace. They had none of the things I was yearning to deliver with the record. And I actually live in a really noisy place, here in New Orleans, so I'm not able to record from home. And a friend of mine who has a place in a really quiet neighborhood who was like, “My neighbors won't care. You can just come here, and set up shop for a little while here.” They were giving me like seven days, and I just couldn't find a rhythm. Some roaches came out there, I think we took some of them [laughter] with us.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Solange: But “Cranes” was the one song that I actually really loved my vocal performance of. It was one night there that I just caught a rhythm, and really caught a vibe, and was really able to get out of my head and do this song. Whatever got into me that night, I wanted to keep it. I started with the backing vocals, which I often do. The ones that are just like

*(Vocals)*

Solange: Harmonies are probably the thing that I'm most confident in.

*(Vocals: “I'll cry it away / Don't you cry it baby”)*

Solange: I think that the, “Don't you cry it,” it's almost to feel like this sense of community. For me, specifically, “Don't you cry baby,” is like, “Your auntie rubbing your back telling you to step up, get up, put your head up,” you know, “walk through this.” My mom always has this thing about the third day, getting up. You know, and your sadness, and existing, and your shit, and your funk. She's always, since we were kids, allowed us two days to mope and stay in bed, and have our little pity parties, but on that third day, you get your ass up, and you ride, and you decide like, “OK, this is what it is, and now I have to exist.” And so, that line specifically comes from that. That's like my mom, my Aunt Bernell, and my Aunt Janelle, in three-part harmony telling me to get your ass up [laughter].

*(Vocals: "Don't you cry it baby")*

Solange: Even the "away's" for me was meant to feel like, you know, a group of women relating this away-ness.

*(Vocals: "Away, away, away, away, away / Away, away, away, away, away")*

Solange: I had been listening to a lot of Alice Coltrane,

*("Transcendence" by ALICE COLTRANE)*

Solange: and really wanting to kind of channel her "Transcendence." Just some of those frequencies that really puncture you and give release.

*("Transcendence" by ALICE COLTRANE)*

*(Music ends)*

Solange: From there, we brought some other musicians in.

*(Guitar)*

Solange: For the sonic makeup of this album, there were a few days where different producers introduce guitar. It just did not feel like it belonged on the album. But towards the end of the record, at the very end, I went to Taz Arnold's studio, and he had a couple musicians just hanging around. And one of them was like, "I want to just try out this guitar sound." And I was like, "Ah, no, no, no guitar on this album." And he played

*(Guitar)*

Solange: it in a way that was so subtle and so rich. And I just thought, *Got to keep that* [laughter]. So it actually is one of two times that the guitar is used on the whole album. The harp sounds at the end,

*(Harp sound)*

Solange: for me, was this visual landscape, that I also had of just black women coming in forces, and their most beautiful, majestic, regal senses.

*(Harp sound)*

Solange: That harp sound is actually a toy from Toys 'R' Us, that one of the synth players brought. I sung him some lines, and he started playing on this thing that was probably like, you know, 6 inches by 12 inches plastic. We had talked about getting, you know, a harpist in, but after that, I was just like, "Actually, no need for the harp player. This is puncturing."

*(Harp sound)*

*(Harp sound ends)*

Solange: A lot of times, if I write a line, I will think to myself, *Could I have said that better?* And on this song, I really did not have those thoughts. It was literally things that I had done to try to fill this void, or open this space, or reduce this load. And I, you know, at times might've thought within the context of this record like, *Could I have said that differently when it was all said and done?* And the answer was really, "No, it was, that's how you felt." I felt that.

*(Guitar)*

Solange: Looking back at that girl, I feel so, so grateful that I'm not in that place. I can still identify with so many of those moments. They're still a part of me, but I am not them.

*(Guitar)*

Solange: I found myself feeling maybe some of those things more than ever within the last couple of years again, but in a totally different way. Whereas to, at first, they related to heartache, they related to just feeling unclear, confused, unworthy. Then, they actually kind of started to become a narrative of feeling these things through the backdrop of the state of how black women are being treated in this country. So much of that song to me also became a song for community. And so many things specifically that I know that black girls are working through, and black women are working through. It became a different story.

*(Guitar)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Cranes in the Sky," by Solange, in its entirety.

*("Cranes in the Sky" by SOLANGE)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more on Solange, including the music video for "Cranes in the Sky," which was co-directed by Solange and her husband, Alan Ferguson. On the site, you'll also find a link to buy the song.

*("Moonlight" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, composer Nicholas Britell breaks down the music from the award-winning film *Moonlight*. Song Exploder is produced by me and Christian Koons, and is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and by MailChimp. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Moonlight" by NICHOLAS BRITELL)*

*(Music ends)*