

Song Exploder
St. Vincent - New York
Episode 114

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.

("New York" by ST. VINCENT)

Hrishikesh: Annie Clark grew up in Texas. She studied the guitar, and moved to New York in the mid-2000s. She started recording and performing under the name St. Vincent in 2006. She's released five albums, she won a Grammy for Best Alternative Album in 2014. Earlier this year, in 2017, St. Vincent released this song called "New York," about the city and neighborhood she calls home. Although nowadays, Annie splits her time between coasts. I spoke to her about this song at her studio in Los Angeles. And if you missed it earlier, just a heads up, that this episode contains explicit language. A lot of explicit language, starting now.

("New York" by ST. VINCENT)

Annie: I get a lot of pleasure from saying "fuck."

(Music fades)

Annie: I love that word. It's so satisfying, it's such a satisfying word to say. It just came out, I mean, it was just very natural, "You're the only motherfucker in the city." And I just liked [laughter] the idea of using, you know, really blue language as a term of endearment. "This motherfucker." Like, "that motherfucker, no way." Like, "motherfucker better get his shit together." I think it's funny. You know, my mother would be horrified, but I've been cursing like a sailor since I was 8. I mean it's just how you talked on the playground in public school in Dallas, so I'm sure there are a lot of people who find it objectionable. To all of them, I apologize for your ears, but I just, it's, motherfucker says like, I know you inside and out. I know you, and you know me, like don't pretend.

(Piano)

Annie: My name is Annie Clark and I make music as St. Vincent.

(Piano ends)

Annie: The original genesis of the song was, I was back in New York, and I texted a friend of mine who had moved away, “New York isn’t New York without you.” And I was like, *Oh, hmm, maybe I’ll squirrel that away.*

(Vocals: “New York isn’t New York without you, love”)

Annie: I still live in New York sometimes. I don’t think I can ever give up that as part of my homeland or identity. But ask me tomorrow, and I’ll say that Texas is my heart and soul. And then, there’s Los Angeles, which is fine [laughter]. Which is nice. The weather’s great. But New York has my heart, and my favorite people in the world. There was another line that I kept kicking around, which was, “I’ve come so far in these few blocks,” which, again, was about my neighborhood in New York. And so, that became, “So far in a few blocks to be solo,”

(Vocals: “So far in a few blocks to be solo”)

Annie: which is a pun. To be alone. And so low. So I wrote it on guitar.

Hrishikesh: At this point, Annie pulled out her phone, and hit play on a voice memo recording.

(Vocals with guitar: “Only motherfucker in the city who can handle me”)

Annie: Oh boy! Then we go, then it turns into Lilith Fair.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Annie: [laughter] Oh no! You know what my worst nightmare is? That my voice memos get like hacked [laughter].

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Annie: Like way more than like nude photos

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Annie: or anything, like no one needs to hear [wordless singing]. But then I ended up, I decided it wasn't a guitar song anyway. I was working on it with Jack Antonoff. We were in Jack Antonoff's studio in New York, and he just started playing it on piano, and it was so nice. If people are aware of my music, they know that I play guitar. But if the song is best suited for piano, insisting that I play it on guitar, is really just this, like, insane act of ego. Why would I [laughter], you know, why would I do that? It's a certain amount of maturity that's just like, I don't need to paint with all the colors all the time. So when Jack and I put the outline of the song together, he played the piano part originally. And then, I went to my friend Thomas Bartlett, who's just my favorite piano player. He's the guy who played on all the National records. And so, I threw it to Thomas, and he played on it.

(Piano)

Annie: Because he has this really lovely upright, and he has felt on the strings, and so he just gets this very intimate, kind of pillowy sound.

(Piano)

Annie: He's just a real genius.

(Piano ends)

Annie: So I had the verses, but I felt like the verses were so airtight that I wasn't sure exactly where to, I knew it needed something else, I knew it needed another section, but I was kind of waiting patiently for that section to come about. And then, Jack Antonoff, he put a really beautiful set of chords in between the second verse and the third verse, and said, "You know, I think it needs to breathe."

(Piano)

Annie: I was like, "Yeah, I like these chords." And then, I had this other song I was working on called "We Were in Paris," and it had the line, "I've lost a hero, I've lost a friend, but for you darling, I'd do it all again." I was like, "Maybe I can take that melody and put it here," because you just have to be ruthless with parts and go, "Is this serving the song? Is this good enough?" And so, I was like, "Oh, this melody works over these chords."

(Vocals: "I have lost a hero / I have lost a friend / But for you, darling / I'd do it all again")

Annie: The line for me, “I’ve lost a hero,” it’s referencing the kind of spectral figures of our collective heroes, but it’s also very personal for me. And 2016 was like, the Earth was like, “Let’s purge ourselves of geniuses.” And it’s very silly to make something like David Bowie’s death about me. I mean, it has nothing to do with me. But I will say that I was really affected and I cried. I really, I cried for somebody I didn’t even know. And I don’t know that I’ve ever done that before. And a lot of people were affected by his death, but it’s just, you’re like, “You can’t die!” And then, Prince, a few months later, it was oof. And then Leonard Cohen, it was just like, “What in the world is going on?” But it’s not just about our big heroes. New York is really a composite for me. It’s everybody I love in that song. It’s everybody I love, and it’s everybody in New York. It’s my whole life in a song.

(Keyboard)

Annie: Jack has a modular synth setup.

(Synth joins)

(Synth ends)

Annie: I mean, OK, here’s the truth. I also have a modular synth. But it takes me about 7 years to get one mediocre sound. So [laughter], like, but Jack actually knows how to use his modular synth, so he put that [makes synth sound]

(Synth with keyboard)

Annie: on there.

(Synth with keyboard)

Annie: I really like the intimacy of just two people in a room. And I trusted his instinct. Yeah, he just

(Strings)

Annie: put a lot of pretty things in there, and it was lovely.

(Strings)

Annie: And then,

(Synth bass)

Annie: that's Jack on a Model D, which is a Moog that's modeled after a Minimoog, but it's kind of the modernized version of it.

(Synth bass)

Annie: It's like a comma.

(Synth bass)

Annie: It says, "Aaaand here we go."

(Synth bass)

Annie: It's kind of like a wind up, wind down like, "Aaaand here's the punchline."

(Vocals with piano and synth bass: "And if I called you from First Avenue / Well, you're the only motherfucker in the city who can handle me")

Annie: At this point, again, speaking of guitar player ego, I was like, "You know, I really should put some guitar on this." There just wasn't any obvious thing [laughter], it's not like it needed a guitar solo, it didn't really need a counter-melody. So we experimented with adding a couple bars of like,

(Guitars)

Annie: swelling, feedback-y tremolo guitars.

(Guitars)

Annie: Jack put those to help swell into the next section.

(Guitars end)

(Beat)

Annie: The drum part is a four on the floor.

(Beat)

Annie: So much of my musical life has kind of been spent on wishing live drums sounded different than live drums sound. So I was way less tweaky on like, “We’ve got to make a drum part that’s clever.” I just wanted to write these just airtight songs. And so, everything was just in support of the song.

(Beat)

Annie: So it’s just a really simple beat augmented by the modular synths,

(Synth joins)

Annie: and the arping Moog.

(Synth bass joins)

Annie: You just want it to go, you just want this feeling of quiet propulsion.

(Music ends)

Annie: And then, I said, “Let’s get your Model D.” And I said, “Let’s do some of those like filter sweeps of the kind of “whoosh”

(Whoosh sound)

Annie: sounds, because I don’t want a cymbal, but I want just the feeling of just like,

(Beat with whoosh sound)

Annie: a big exhale.

(Beat with whoosh sound)

(Music ends)

Annie: After I finished my last record, I was like, *whatever I do in the future, it’s going to be programmed beats, and it’s going to be pedal steel.*

(Pedal steel)

Annie: That's Greg Leisz, he's an incredible pedal steel player. I'm obsessed with pedal steel. I didn't grow up on country music.

(Pedal steel ends)

Annie: It was on the radio, like I more or less knew the hits, but I was specifically not into country music. To me, country music was, like, really uncool in the early 90s, whatever. I've since gone back, and been like, "Country's amazing!"

(Pedal steel)

Annie: But there's another touchpoint of pedal steel, which is Pink Floyd, *Dark Side of the Moon*. That was something I was definitely referencing.

(Pedal steel)

Annie: No one's ever referenced that record before [laughter].

(Pedal steel)

(Pedal steel ends)

(Piano)

Annie: I think this song should be the kind of song that you dance to in your bed. Like you can cry to it and dance to it. I've written, I guess, a lot of songs now. And it's the first song I've written that I thought, *Oh this might be someone's favorite song*. I've never had that experience before [laughter]. I mean I maybe felt like, *Maybe someone will like this guitar part*, you know? Or *That's a nice lyric!* But never ever, "Oh, oh, this could be someone's favorite." I got kind of bored with cleverness. I think that the song just goes straight to the heart, it doesn't pull any punches, it doesn't try to be something it's not, it doesn't really say, "Hey, look over here! Look over here!" it just, it's just a nice song from the heart. And it only took me five albums to write.

(Piano ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "New York," by St. Vincent, in its entirety.

("New York" by ST. VINCENT)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on St. Vincent, including a link to buy this song. If you love Song Exploder, please leave a review or a rating over at itunes.com/songexploder. And if you want to show everyone how much you love Song Exploder, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/merch. Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Song Exploder's a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting-edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more about all the shows at radiotopia.fm. Follow me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. You can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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