

**Song Exploder**  
**Waxahatchee - Fire**  
**Episode 189**

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.

*("Fire" by WAXAHATCHEE)*

Katie: Writer's block is something I experience with every record in one way, shape, or form. I have the feeling of the universe allotted a certain number of songs and I hit my quota, and now I'm never going to write another good song again. But usually the darkest moments of writer's block, right when it really gets hard and you're really kind of borderline panicking over it, that's usually when you push through in my experience. It's like I just kept putting one foot in front of the other, kept doing the next thing. And before I knew it, I wrote "Fire." And it really felt like, "Okay. I got this, it's going to be okay."

Katie: I'm Katie Crutchfield from Waxahatchee.

Hrishikesh: Katie Crutchfield is a singer and songwriter from Birmingham, Alabama. She's been making music under the name Waxahatchee since 2010. Her fifth album, *Saint Cloud*, came out this past March. *Pitchfork* named it Best New Music, and *The Guardian* called it the best album of the year so far. In this episode, Katie breaks down how she made the song "Fire."

*("Fire" by WAXAHATCHEE)*

*(Music fades out)*

Katie: As I was preparing to write the song, I was traveling. I had been spending a lot of time here in Kansas, which is where I live. It was winter and I was sort of hammering away at writing the record. And then I went on a trip with my partner, Kevin, to Birmingham, Alabama, which is where I'm from. We were visiting my family and as we were leaving, I got this melody in my head [sings melody] and it was just sort of the most awkward timing because it was as I was saying goodbye to my family, as I was about to get into a car for a very long journey with Kevin and I just couldn't find an easy way to hold onto it. Like usually I would just record that in my phone and then forget about it until I had some time to actually sit with it, but I was too distracted with what was happening right in

front of me. So I started the drive and I just repeated the melody, just sort of over and over, and I kind of would lose it for a second and then it would come back, and by the time we got to Memphis that's when I started to really put lyrics to it. And then the moment that I got home, I recorded the very first demo of the whole song.

*(Demo electric piano)*

Katie: I gravitated toward electric piano. With every album, I usually have an instrument of choice that sort of is the thing that's inspiring me, and guitar, I am hyper aware of the chord progressions that I like tend to go to and with piano, I just know so little. Like it takes me a minute to even figure out, "Is this a C chord?" You know it's like my knowledge of it is like pretty limited. So I can like let go of some of the hang ups that I have, just because I don't really know what I'm doing, so I can kind of just stick to what sounds exciting melodically to me rather than get in my head about chord progressions and things like that. The first line that came to me was "That's what I wanted."

*(Demo chorus vocals along with electric piano: "That's what I wanted / It's not as if we cry a river, call it rain / West Memphis is on fire in the light of day")*

Katie: I wrote that as we were driving over the Mississippi River, over a bridge from Tennessee to Arkansas to West Memphis, and the sun was kind of going down and the light was reflecting, it was so bright. I was just trying to find a way to like poetically talk about that and like also talk about what I wanted in that larger moment.

*(Demo ends)*

Katie: You know, I had been going through a lot of dark stuff. I had just gotten sober and I had chosen to take a lot of time off from music. And I think I was having a little bit of an identity crisis, and then having these big panicky writer's block feelings. So I wanted to find a way to poetically say I can love myself through this darkness that's happening.

*(Demo chorus vocals along with electric piano: "I take it for granted / If I could love you unconditionally / I could iron out the edges of the darkest sky / For some of us, it ain't enough / It ain't enough")*

Katie: I was thinking a lot at the time about unconditional love and really kind of thinking of that as like the ultimate position to take. The softness around loving anybody unconditionally, loving yourself unconditionally. I was thinking a lot about that as like something that I wanted to be able to achieve in like all my relationships so just not let it have terms, to just accept people and accept myself.

*(Demo ends)*

Katie: So I had like a loose idea but I knew I needed help. I knew I needed like other people to come in and help me figure out what the next phase of the song was going to be. I sent the song to Brad, Brad Cook, who is the producer of the record who was really like my main collaborator on the whole thing. When you're in a project where, you're, you know, it's really just like a solo project, it's so important to have a sounding board, to have a collaborator, a person who you can bounce ideas off of, or talk to about your songs. You know, from the beginning, Brad really shared my excitement about the song and then I pretty quickly sent it to the guys who I knew were going to be the band on the record. Nick Kinsey, who's a great drummer, and Bobby Colombo and Bill Lennox, who are both in the band, Bonny Doon, an amazing band in their own right. There was one time where the band was in Durham and everybody was together and we were all demoing. And most of the songs I had written for the record were really straightforward and it really felt like, "Okay we're all just gonna set up in a room as a band and like knock all these songs out." But, you know, anytime we got to "Fire," we'd all just kind of look at each other and be like, "Let's just skip this one. We'll come back to it." And then we just ended up doing that until it was time to go into the studio. I think we were all scared to overthink it and we were scared to like make it go through a million processes. We all kind of knew like this one is going to be different. It was like there was this unspoken agreement between all of us that, "Let's tuck this one away and then when we get in the studio, we'll just see if some kind of magic happens."

*(Electric piano)*

Katie: We made the record at Sonic Ranch in West Texas, it is a amazing studio that is a like 4,000 acre pecan ranch and there's like a compound of recording studios on the property. And I went back and re-recorded my electric piano, and then we started with the beat.

*(Electric piano along with kick drum)*

Katie: So I had just anticipated like this is going to be a drum machine song and the rest of the record is going to have analog drums. So I don't know how it happened but Brad was like, "Let's get Nick in there and let's work on the drum sound to make it sound a little bit more like a drier kind of like manufactured beat."

*(Kick drum)*

Katie: We just recorded like a really basic sort of track just doing four-on-the-floor. And then the snare.

*(Snare joins)*

Katie: Then he added the toms.

*(Toms join)*

Katie: The beat sort of grows and evolves.

*(Electric piano joins the beat)*

Katie: And we were just all so excited about the drum sound. We were like, "This is actually so much better than a drum machine," because it really does feel like a performance, like there's a warmth to it.

*(Electric piano along with beat end)*

Katie: I believe what came next were the guitars, and that was what was the most surprising about the song. I didn't really even think about guitars on the song, I kind of didn't really see it, and then Bobby just kind of pulled out this part.

*(Picked guitar)*

Katie: He started doing that along with Nick and I was like, "Oh my goodness."

*(Drums join picked guitar)*

Katie: And then Bill wrote this beautiful sort of complimentary lick on the song right after Bobby.

*(Electric guitar)*

*(Picked guitar joins)*

Katie: That's just totally pulled

*(Bass joins)*

Katie: out of thin air and was not at all part of the plan and yet now I'm obsessed with it.

*(Drums join)*

*(Music ends)*

Katie: I was feeling kind of sick going into Sonic Ranch. I came to record straight from Barcelona and I had this fear of like, "I'm going to get on that long flight and I'm just going to get sick right as I'm going into the studio to make my record." And of course I did. So I was feeling really nervous about the vocals. I kind of warned everyone, which is just like a fatal flaw. I was like, "Guys, I'm going to take this slow, okay. I'm going to do like one line at a time, then we're going to need to stop and I'm going to like take a sip of my tea, and we're going to like have a breath, and then I'm going to do the next night line." And everybody was like, "Yeah, whatever you need, it's all good. Like you don't have to stress." And then I did that and it sounded so wrong, and so forced and too performative, and I was really frustrated. And then Brad was like, "Just go in there and like lay down one more scratch vocal, like just do the whole thing from top to bottom and then we'll just move on and we'll come back to vocals, don't worry about it." And I was like, "Okay," so I went in the booth, and then I did that and I walked out and everyone was like, "That's it. That's the vocal take because it just had like an ease to it."

*(Vocal take: "I take it for granted / If I could love you unconditionally / I could iron)*

*(Electric piano joins: "out the edges of the darkest sky / For some of us, it ain't enough / It ain't enough")*

Katie: I really feel like this part of the song is really for me. I was like, "I want to write a love song that's sort of about this turbulent relationship, but I want the

relationship to be sort of between me at my best versus me at my worst, and sort of those two voices negotiating with each other and trying to come together as like one.”

*(Demo first verse harmonized vocals: “And when I turn back around / Will you drain me back out? / Will you let me believe that I broke through? / Tomorrow could feel like a hundred years later / I’m wiser and slow and attuned”)*

Katie: As sort of folky as it had become with the analog instruments, we still wanted it to feel poppy and synthy so we sort of put some layers.

*(Synths)*

Katie: Different synth and organ sounds to sort of blend, just like extra atmosphere to build the vibe of the song.

*(Synth and organ sounds)*

Katie: The whole song at the end, when I finished recording it, I realized pretty quickly that it did kind of do everything I had set out for it to do. I don't know, stepping into that power of like, “I'm going to write this song that's going to be about this kind of tormented relationship that I have with myself and actively kind of piecing that together.” Honestly, I feel like this idea of unconditional love as something that I could have and hold for myself, at least that being a goal was kind of a new thing for me. Yeah, I'm sure that in hindsight, when I look back on things in my life, I will certainly see that as a, just a step in the right direction, I guess.

*(Electric piano along with beat)*

Katie: Even just with the sounds, even when you take the lyrics out of it, just the mood of the song is that like warm, loving, uplifting energy. Like it's supposed to make people feel good and happy and excited. And I felt like this is,

*(Electric guitar joins)*

Katie: yeah, weirdly exactly what it was supposed to be.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Fire,” by Waxahatchee, in its entirety.

*(“Fire” by WAXAHATCHEE)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Waxahatchee. You’ll also find links to buy or stream the song and you can watch the music video there. Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of independent, creative podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). If you’d like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.