

Song Exploder
Maren Morris – Humble Quest
Episode 234

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.

("Humble Quest" by MAREN MORRIS)

Hrishikesh: Maren Morris is a Grammy-winning, multi-platinum artist. She's also won multiple country music awards, including CMAs for Female Vocalist of the Year, and Single of the Year in 2020, but her feelings about the country music industry are kind of complicated, as she discusses in this episode. She breaks down her song "Humble Quest," which is the title track from her sixth album. It was produced by Greg Kurstin, who's won the Producer of the Year Grammy more than once. The album came out in March, and hit #2 on the Billboard Country Chart. But before "Humble Quest" was a title, Maren had to figure out what the words meant to her. That's where the song began.

("Humble Quest" by MAREN MORRIS)

Maren: My name is Maren Morris. I was driving around Nashville one day, and when I'm driving, especially by myself, that's where I get a lot of song ideas, and humble quest was one of them that day. And I didn't know what the hell it meant, I just thought, *wow, that's a weird phrase, weird two words sandwiched together*, but I thought it was interesting.

And I was writing that next day or two with my friends, Jimmy Robbins and Laura Veltz, and I just had that title. I always try to come into the songwriting room with my co-writers with something; some sort of melody, or title or concept. So, I did sit down at the piano in my basement and try to find a progression of chords that I could even start this with just so we had something, and I had my voice recorder on my phone going.

(Voice memo with piano: "Haven't looked up in a while / But I can sure as hell fake a smile / (Mumbles)")

Maren: It was in a much lower key, cause I really only can play in one key on the piano.

(Voice memo with piano: "I'm on a humble quest and I still haven't found it yet / Still haven't found it yet")

(Voice memo ends)

Maren: And, Laura's first reaction when I said I have this title called "Humble Quest," she was like, "okay, let's hear more." *(laughs)*

It's always an open book, writing with Laura and Jimmy. They are close friends of mine, but also, we have a really deep trust with one another. So, it spurred like an hour long conversation. So yeah, it was just a therapy session for me coming to them with this idea and then kind of chiseling out what it could mean.

(Piano)

Maren: I think the word humble had been hanging around my head for months because as I become more mature and have a little bit more wisdom each year of my life, I grow more confident in myself. But there is a funny *(sighs)* pressure put on people when they are confident in what they do, and sometimes that gets perceived as arrogance or having a lack of humility. And I started to get less offended by it and just really try to break it apart.

(Piano ends)

Maren: Like, what is that phenomenon where the word humble is really weaponized against people? And I would say particularly women. Yeah, That's kind of the headspace, emotionally I was in when we wrote that song that day. I played them on Jimmy's piano, what I had already started that morning, but that was all I had. I told Jimmy, "but obviously I need it like four keys up."

(Higher piano)

Maren: And then I was able to get away from the piano. Because Jimmy's great at playing every instrument. So Laura and I can play guitar and whatnot, but having Jimmy in the room to kind of drive the musicality of the song helps us, like Laura and myself, really focus on the lyric and the melody.

(Drum beat)

Maren: So Jimmy is at his desk making the demo. We've got the drum beat. And then he's just got tons of like guitars around that he just feeds right into the computer.

(Guitar joins)

Maren: So he's doing all the parts, and kind of laying that groundwork for us to be able to really wrap a story into. And then once we finished that structure,

(Drums and guitar ends)

Maren: Jimmy will turn to me and say, "are you ready to sing?" Most of the time it's just scary 'cause you don't know the song yet, but it's also when you get the best vocal takes.

(Vocals)

Maren: We were working on the chorus; I think it was Laura that came up with the, "and damn I do my best" line.

(Vocals and beat: "I'm on a humble quest / And damn I do my best / Not gonna hold my breath 'cause I still haven't found it yet")

Maren: That just felt so solid. Like, okay, it's an ongoing, perpetual quest. It felt almost, you know, not like a fist pump, but it felt really encouraging.

I just remember when Greg Kurstin, my producer, heard this demo, Greg really didn't want to start over. We put real instruments on the final version of "Humble Quest," but he's so respectful of my relationship with Jimmy and so we kept the heart of what Jimmy did musically.

(Drums)

Maren: Greg is one of those virtuoso producers that just plays everything so well. I mean, he's an incredible drummer, incredible guitar player.

(Guitar)

(Drums join)

Maren: Classically trained pianist.

(Piano joins)

He's a nerd; he's a genius.

(Music ends)

Maren: So I think the only time we ever really put another musician on this album was steel guitar.

(Steel guitar)

Maren: Rich Hinman did all the steel guitar parts. I love steel guitar, I just haven't had the song that lent itself to needing the steel guitar, on one of my previous albums. A lot of people attribute it only to country music, but it doesn't need to be these

sort of honky-tonk sounding steel parts. It's so beautiful. The way that it's woven throughout this song.

(Steel guitar ends)

Maren: At the beginning of 2021, we were coming off of such a heavy year.

(Guitar)

Maren: You know, 2020 was in many ways this season of change for the world. And I was growing really disconnected and frustrated with the music industry. Country music, particularly, you know, where I reside and where I feel at home, I feel like country music really had a lot of changing to do.

(Vocals join: "Got easier not to ask / Just kept hitting my head on the glass")

Maren: I have deep respect and roots in country music, but once you open your eyes to the imbalance of representation, not just against women, but people of color, LGBTQ, yeah there's so many things that you open your eyes to and you're like, "what the hell is going on here?" But if you open your mouth about an injustice that you see, or you question the system. You know, people start to think like, oh, you're biting the hand that fed you.

(Vocals and guitar: "I was so nice 'til I woke up / I was polite 'til I spoke up")

Maren: Humility is the brand of country music, I feel like. It just makes me always think about the differences between pop music and country music. You know, if you listen to any like Cardi B song or Dua Lipa, they are completely owning their womanhood, their finances, their CEO-ness. And it's this amazingly, inspiring bravado that people are totally accepting of in pop music, but in country music,

(Beat)

Maren: if a woman ever said anything like that in a song, I think a lot of people would be like, "she really lost track of her roots."

(Vocals and beat: "The line between fulfilled and full of myself / I'm trying to find it and I might need some help / Standing up was enough of a battle / How do I not cast a shadow? / I'm a hell of a hassle")

Maren: So there's a song by the Backstreet Boys that I love called, "Shape of My Heart." And it's like, *(sings)* "looking back on the things I've done / I was trying to be someone da da da da" — that's the chorus. And then in the bridge part of that

song, it's like, *(sings)* "I'm looking back on things I have done." And instead of writing an entire new bridge, you just repurpose lyrics from the chorus, but you put it over a different melody. So we did the same thing here *(laughs)*. I promise it's not just out of laziness, it just feels great.

(Vocals and beat: "I'm on a, I'm on a, I'm on a humble quest / I'm on a, I'm on a, I'm on a humble quest / Not gonna hold my breath / I'm on a humble quest / And damn I do my best / (Not gonna hold my breath / 'Cause I still haven't found it yet)")

Maren: We kept the harmonies that I did in the demo on the final album version. I love doing the higher and lower third.

(Backing vocals: "And damn I do my best")

Maren: It's kind of like, you're Peter Pan's shadow. you're very locked step with, with what you've done because it's you.

(Backing vocals: "I'm on a humble quest")

Maren: It feels so anthemic, but it's so personal. And those are always *(laughs)* my favorite songs of artists is like, it's so personal, but somehow it feels like it's stadium worthy.

(Vocals and beat: "Not gonna hold my breath / 'Cause I still haven't found it yet / No I still haven't found it yet")

Maren: I loved the way that we kind of wrapped the chorus up with saying,

(Steel guitar)

Maren: "I don't know if I'm ever gonna find it, but I'm gonna keep searching for it."

(Steel guitar)

Maren: For me, what it is, is feeling that self security and also knowing that you're not going to have all of the answers, every single time.

(Steel guitar)

Maren: Some days I have it or I feel like I do, and some days I absolutely don't. And knowing that that's wisdom in itself is knowing that even at a hundred, you're not gonna have it all figured out, and there's something kind of freeing about that.

(Steel guitar)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Humble Quest” by Maren Morris, in its entirety.

(“Humble Quest” by MAREN MORRIS)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder, and the show’s theme music, were made by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley and Casey Deal, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker.

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I’m Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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