

Song Exploder
Sudan Archives - Selfish Soul
Episode 237

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

("Selfish Soul" by SUDAN ARCHIVES)

Hrishikesh: Sudan Archives is a singer, songwriter, producer, and violinist. She grew up in Cincinnati before moving to LA. Her music has been called "viscerally gorgeous" by The Guardian, and "stunning" by Pitchfork, who gave her in 'Best New Music.' This year, she's releasing her second album, and one of the tracks on it is "Selfish Soul." She told me the idea for this song started when she asked her boyfriend, James, who is the rapper Nocando, to shave her head. Cutting off her hair made her reflect on her whole hair story; from experiences she had as a kid, to the cultural and racial issues that have historically surrounded Black women's hair.

("Selfish Soul" by SUDAN ARCHIVES)

Sudan: My name is Sudan Archives.

So I cut my hair on New Year's Eve, 'cause I kind of feel like the hair holds energy, and maybe if I cut my hair off I can become like this brand new woman on New Years. I had these braids in my head and normally, when you have braids, you cut them, and then you unraid them, and then you take your hair out of it and you take the extensions out of it, but I am extreme. I just went for it and I just chopped the braids off, right at my head. And I was just, like, looking at myself like, *oh my God, I really just did that.* And then I remember unbraiding the remaining extensions. And then I was just like, "James, help me cut my hair off!" And then he just shaved my whole head. I actually liked it a lot. I was like, *I'm sexy!*

(Clap loop)

Sudan: I just couldn't go to sleep. So when I can't go to sleep, I just mess around in the studio.

(Kick joins)

Sudan: So I just like started with that loop. And I, like, build the song off of the clap.

(Clap loop)

Sudan: I really wanted to make something upbeat that you could move your waist to.

(Clap loop)

(Drums join)

Sudan: And then after the claps I just added the bowed “du-nu-nu-nu-nu-nu-nu.”

(Violin)

Sudan: And then I remembered I really liked that and I wanted, like, a response to that.

(Violin response)

Sudan: In a lot of Ethiopian and Sudanese violin traditional music, I'm super inspired by the way they arrange violin and vocals

(“Friends 2000 (Fridge Remix) by X-TRANCE)

Sudan: It's not about violins being tucked in the back on like the bridge, it's about like a conversation between violin and vocals, usually.

(“Friends 2000 (Fridge Remix) by X-TRANCE)

Sudan: I was like, I've never heard that approach before, that's so cool. I was like, “maybe I can do that because it's just me and my violin, you know?”

(Violin)

(Vocals join: “It’s been so long since I had a sew in /With a frontal and some color / If I cut it all off, will it even grow? / It’ll grow back real long”)

Sudan: When I started writing lyrics for the song, I just remember just thinking, like, *if I cut my hair, hope I grow it long / back long, back time like way before / If I wear it straight, will they like me more? Like those girls on front covers.*

And then I remember feeling like it had a reggae vibe. And in that music, their vocals have this reverb delay, like it's coming back left and right.

(Vocals: "If I cut my hair, hope I grow it long / back long, back time like way before / If I wear it straight, will they like me more? Like those girls on front covers / Long hair make 'em stay little longer / Stay hair, stay straight though we feel ashamed / By the curls waves and natural things / Curls waves and natural things")

Sudan: When I was a kid, my mom basically would braid our natural hair all the time. And I remember being in the beauty salon and we were about to get our hair done, so we had our hair out, it was like huge Afros. And I remember the barber was like, "y'all, can just wear y'all hair like that, you know?"

I remember stuff like that to stuff like my big sister working at the Marriott. Jobs like that are big deals in Ohio, you know, like corporate. But I remember her coming back from work and her saying, "they told me that I can't wear my hair out and I have to wear it straight 'cause it's unprofessional." And I was like, "that's so stupid." And I was just thinking like, *them white girls there, wearing their hair down, how it comes outta their head*. But my big sister, when she wears her hair naturally, they're like, if you do that again, you're gonna get fired. It's unprofessional. And that was like my first experience of noticing the racism that goes on with black hair, specifically, and specifically in corporate America. I feel like our texture is so different and unique, it's like they wanna control it because they don't understand it.

(Vocals: "I don't want no struggles / I don't want no fears / I don't want no struggles / I don't want no fears / I don't want no struggles / I don't want no / Does it make sense to you / Why I cut it off?"

Sudan: The whole hook is about: Does it make sense to you, why I cut it off?

(Vocals: "Okay, one time if I grow it long / Am I good enough? Am I good enough? / 'Bout time I embrace myself and soul / Time I feed my selfish soul")

Sudan: I had everything written up until the second verse, and then I was mumbling, *(mumbles)* like the flow.

(Violin)

(Beat join)

(Mumbling vocals join)

Sudan: After that I was looking for, like, a female engineer because I've never, like, worked with a female engineer, specifically for this song. So I met Lafemmebear, who's a black female producer, engineer, artist. And then she's in the basement and we're basically trying to re-record these "Selfish Soul" stems.

(808)

Sudan: She added this 808 sub drum and that really made it ignorant sounding, which I was happy about.

(Clap loop & 808)

Sudan: 'Cause I love her sense of rhythm.

(Clap loop & 808 end)

Sudan: She had a djembe and I played it.

(Djembe and beat)

Sudan: And I like, remember I was like in the studio, like "yeah!"

(Djembe and beat)

(Djembe and beat fade)

Sudan: We even made a vocal booth out of moving blankets and re-recorded some vocal parts. But I kept like the first verse and, like, the background vocals, I kept them all. She was like, "that's gonna affect the quality of the song, you know?"

And I was like, "exactly." 'Cause we don't want nothing too polished.

(Clap loop)

Sudan: That's how I envision my music, like a huge sound with, like, really cool textured lofi elements. But I just want it to bang.

(Beat)

(Vocals join: "It's been so long since I had a sew in / With a frontal and some color / If I cut it all off, will it even grow? / It'll grow back real long / Gotta prove them all wrong")

Sudan: So the second verse is basically like talking about the nervousness you get when you date anyone. Like, "I met this guy, you know, and we're chilling, and right now I have like some clip-on extensions (*laughs*) in my hair and it's getting late, and I think we might go home and stuff together, but I'm scared."

(Vocals: "I was worried about the clip-ins in my hair coming out / Couldn't even catch a vibe")

Sudan: The lyrics are like, "I hope he doesn't know that this weave is getting old."

(Vocals: "Hope he still loves me if he knows that this weave is getting old / The extension that I had to offer / He said, "Baby, don't you bother / But when it's gone just don't act surprised")

Sudan: So when I say, "but when it's gone, just don't act surprised," I'm speaking to him. I can tell that he just doesn't really care about what's on my head or not, but I'm basically saying, "but you know, when it's gone though, just don't act surprised," like as a joke. I'm gonna look different (*laughs*) without all this hair or if I shave it off. But that person that I met ended up shaving off my head.

Hrishikesh: So are you talking about James there?

Sudan: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Hrishikesh: Were you nervous at all to share that part of the song?

Sudan: No! I was nervous to share some other parts of the songs on the album, 'cause I'm talking shit about him.

Hrishikesh: (*laughs*)

Sudan: But this one I'm just like, "you accept me for who I am! Hahaha" (*laughs*).

(Violin and claps)

Sudan: Usually James comes down and I'm, like, lyrically asking him what he thinks because I'm always open to help, to criticism, to advice to like anything with anybody that I love. But he was just like, "This is just your story, you know, like, this is just gonna be a special song to little black girls."

(Violin with effects)

Sudan: After this I was like, "I'm feeling like I need a bass. I need like a funky bass. But everything I'm doing, it sounds weird." but basically, Dexter Story, I reached out to him because we both have the same interest and passion in

like, East African music. So we're always like sending each other demos. Like, "can you add something? So he sent me a bass and like some really pretty sounds to match with it. I dragged the bass in there and I was like, "this is perfect."

(Bass)

Sudan: But it's like washed out now.

(Bass and 808)

(Claps join)

Sudan: Ben Dickey's my manager, and basically helped produce the album with me. We've been working for a while, but this is the first time we're making music together. It was his idea to wash out that bass and he washed out like my backing vocals.

(Backing vocals with effects)

Sudan: I ended up liking everything he did. I felt like he really understood what I wanted and it was like no pressure. It was like with Ben, with my engineer that I was working with, with my friends that were adding stuff to the record, I just felt like I was a part of a family and we were all just like making a really good meal.

(Vocals: "Bout time I embrace myself and soul / Time I feed my selfish soul")

(Violin with Effects)

Sudan: On this song, I was just trying to, like, tell my hair story and hopefully everybody would be like, "yeah, that's, I relate to it in this way, and not just about hair, but just cutting off toxic people and toxic energy and just toxic ways, you know? I remember when I got one of my first jobs at McDonald's, and I started wearing my natural hair, the manager was like, "I like your hair better that other way." You know? It's like even, the barber and how he basically was like, "you know you don't gotta wear your hair like that." That was like really cute and empowering, but in a way it's like, "yeah, but you don't need to tell me what to do with my hair, too." Hair is just so weird for black women. It's always like, people always wanna say, "they like this. They like that. You can't do this. You can't do that." We kind of, like, always take that history and make it our own. You know, it's not like giving perms now is a bad thing. That's like what I'm saying in the song, like, even if you wanna wear your hair straighten now, that's not a bad thing, but don't let people,

(Beat)

Sudan: decipher what to do with your hair, and when you wanna wear straight, and when you wanna wear an Afro. Like it's not up to them, it's up to you as a person.

(Beat)

(Vocals join: "Okay one time (time) / Okay one time (time) / Okay one time (time) / Okay one time (time) / (Cut it, cut it off)")

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Selfish Soul" by Sudan Archives in its entirety.

("Selfish Soul" by SUDAN ARCHIVES)

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

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