

**Song Exploder**  
**Panic! At the Disco - Viva Las Vengeance**  
**Episode 240**

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

Panic! At the Disco is the Grammy-nominated project of Brendon Urie, who originally started it as a band with his high school friends from Las Vegas in 2004. In the eighteen years since, Panic! at the Disco has won American Music Awards, MTV Video Music Awards, iHeartRadio Music awards, and more.

In August 2022, Brendon released the seventh Panic! at the Disco album, Viva Las Vengeance. The title track hit #1 on Billboard's Alternative Airplay chart. In this episode, Brendon tells the story of how he, and Grammy-nominated producer Jake Sinclair, and Oscar-nominated songwriter Mike Viola all got together to make the song "Viva Las Vengeance."

Brendon: I grew up musical. My mom played organ for the church, sang in the choir, my dad as well. You know, they both played guitar. So music was always around the house, I had to come in and be the loud, younger child and, and ask for drums. And my parents were like, yeah, just get all your energy out.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Shut up and go to bed / She said, "Viva Las Vengeance" / Shut up and go to bed / She said "Viva Las Vengeance")*

I am Brendon Urie, and I have a band called Panic! At the Disco.

I was wandering around my studio aimlessly at 3:00 AM, 4:00 AM.

And I had this earworm in my head. (Brendon sings) I just kept, like, humming that over and over.

Then I started questioning myself, like, What am I doing here? Why am I still awake right now? Why won't my brain turn off? 'Shut up and go to bed!'

Like, I was so drained, but I was restless, you know, 'cause I had this idea and I knew I needed to sleep, but I couldn't.

That's usually how it starts for me: I have this thing trapped in my brain, I gotta get it out and it won't leave my head until I put it down melodically.

So I shut the doors and started recording all this stuff in the studio.

So the first demo was, it was very much like The Cars. It was like (\*mimics guitar plucks\*) little guitars chugging along.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(demo intro)*

And I kind of wanted this doo-wop style of drums.

So it was like start--and--stop

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(demo drums in with some vocals)*

I didn't have any words at this point, but I had the melody.

And so I wrote down like some nonsense stuff. Whatever it sounded like I was saying, like 'folded ones' or 'loaded guns' or something like that.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(demo vocals)*

Having that driving force for it kind of helped me be like, "Oh yeah, I should go back and look at old lyrics that I've written down, ideas that I've had that I haven't used yet."

So I went back in my Notes app and I was just scrolling through and I was like, oh yeah, this thing: Viva las vengeance. And that came from a movie. I was watching this horror movie called Army of the Dead. Basically, the world was in a dystopia of like zombie-like nature, but the only zombies were in Vegas.

And Dave Bautista's character, he's this like, ex-Marine and on his jacket is a patch that says "Viva Las Vengeance."

So I was like, oh, that's great, you know, and it makes sense for me, being from Vegas.

So at that point I did have the lyrics, you know, "Shut up and go to bed" and "Viva las vengeance."

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Shut up and go to bed / She said, "Viva Las Vengeance")*

At the time I was just kind of taking a break from everything. I was so tired.

There was COVID, and the lockdowns, and I was hoping to just hang with friends, like I usually do when I feel stressed.

I just wanna, you know, ground myself with people I've worked with and, and hung out with for years.

So, you know, I turned to my buddy Jake Sinclair.

Jake is a music producer and musician. You know, we've worked on countless albums together, countless songs and just, being friends for a long time, it's easy to bounce ideas off of someone that you trust.

So, I played the demo, and Jake was like, "Yeah, that's good. Let's work on that."

But then, Jake had to go on a family trip. He said, *Well, hey, I'm gonna be outta town. Why don't you go hang out with Mike Viola? You know, you guys click really well together and I think that that would just be really cool of you to do.*

*(piano melody)*

You know, a lot of times, especially, like, having done songwriting sessions, living in LA, I wasn't a person that could get into a room with strangers and find a way to connect with anybody or like, impress them with some idea, and I wanted to, kind of, freak myself out with what we had written and no one was really into that.

So I just took a step back. But then when you meet people like Mike Viola or Jake Sinclair, for me, I just don't have to feel like I'm working.

*(acoustic guitar)*

So the second demo I did for "Viva", I went to Mike's house. You know, we sat down, I grabbed an acoustic.

Once I showed Mike the song, he pretty much understood it immediately,

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Demo vocals)*

He's just like, "Yeah. You know, let's talk about the chords."

And I was like, you know, *Is it too high? Or is there a thing we can do to like, make it more exciting once the chorus hits? Like, should we do like, a key change?*

And he's, like, *Yeah absolutely. Let's try that.*

*(Acoustic demo with key change)*

And so, even on that second demo, I was still trying to figure it out and, you know, thank God for Mike Viola coming in and, and having such a well-versed knowledge of all those types of little songwriting tricks to help push the song forward.

So we went to Jake's studio and you know, in the past it was just me building myself as the band, as like, a one-man thing: I would do the drums, then I would do guitar, then I would do the bass, and then do the vocals and the harmonies.

But this time I was like, I have these amazing musicians; I should utilize their talents.

*(bass)*

And so, Jake's on bass.

And, you know, Mike's on guitar,

*(bass and guitar)*

And I'm on drums.

*(bass, guitar, and drums)*

You know, we just sat down and I think we played through it once or twice and then recorded the third time, and we were like, *All right!*

I wanted to step away from production styles I had done in the past.

I've kind of started drifting further and further away from overproduction, and this whole album was recorded to an eight track tape machine, because at the time I was just, like, fed up with having to go back and revisit a thing and refix a thing and Autotune this thing, and it's like, just figure it out and record it in the moment.

And if we're gonna do this, let's all track the three of us, as the foundation for this, because there's no click track; we're just looking at each other and vibing in the room, and it really brought it back to, like, the first punk bands I ever started in middle school, you know. That's really what it felt like.

*(instrumental)*

And we're like, "Well, there's the foundation for the song. Let's sing it."

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Shut up and go to bed / She said, "Viva Las Vengeance" / Shut up and go to bed / She said "Viva Las Vengeance")*

A big portion of the time I write songs, I'm thinking about the live performance, what the energy is behind that.

That's really kind of been the glue for as long as I've been doing Panic.

I mean, I've always wanted it to be performance-based to a certain degree and, like, theatrical as all hell.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Didn't wanna kill the DJ / But it can't hurt to tryyyyy-YYYY!")*

I wanted to make it raw, and a lot of it was just like, my relationship with my job and my relationship with fans who see me as this person in this band, as this character, and me knowing that that's full well not who I am.

I mean, the first album for Panic!... You know, we were so green and like didn't, I mean, there was no experience for any of it.

But God, it was exciting, because it was like, this world that we've admired for so long had become so real, all in an instant, and it was overwhelming. So we started playing characters.

And, you know, that's masking all of the fears and insecurities that, you know, I'm still holding onto, I'm sure.

I'm just a nervous wreck most of the time, and when I'm not expending energy to get rid of that, you know, I can become like, really, really anxious and have pretty severe like, anxiety attacks.

But that's why, you know, it's so important for me to, like, keep performing, I just, it's like, I have to be 'On', you know; turn it on, be this guy now because you can't have a, a breakdown out of your anxiety on stage, that would be bad.

So play a character, you know, like do something else or act like you have the answers or something.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Hacking at my feed, act like you are me / No one really cares / Nothing's really real, no one really feels / Nothing to declare")*

Really, it's pulling from my personal experience. I mean, "I don't want to be a diva, I just want to be free / On a sofa with sativa living the dream."

I mean, that's really like, how this album was written. I was like, you know, the world is, is crumbling and the world's on fire.

So, I just want to get high and write music with my friends.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "I don't wanna be a diva / I just wanna be free / On a sofa with Sativa / Living the dream")*

We would all stack around one microphone, the three of us, you know, Beach Boys style, and just stack our harmonies together.

And, you know, giving credit where it is totally due is Mike Viola. He would sit there with an acoustic and I would sing a note naturally in this falsetto, you know, so I'm like

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Power strip")*

And he'd go, "Okay, cool. So you sing in that range and then we'll find harmonies around that."

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Power strip")*

Jake has this amazing baritone, like lower voice. So he's the lower harmony, Mike's in the middle and I'm screaming on the top.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Out of it")*

We didn't use headphones when we made this album.

Like, we just had the speaker at a low volume and it's like, if you can't hear it, like just don't sing as loud, you know?

And it was kind of teaching us to hone in our voices and find this perfect balance.

It just feels, I don't know, it was joyful.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Viva Las Vengeance")*

So, you know, we had our eight-track. We were like, well, if we're gonna record a full orchestra, you know, with horns and strings and all this stuff like, we're gonna need more tracks.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Strings)*

I have known Rob Mathis, who was the string composer, since our second album, "Pretty. Odd." Rob's arrangements are bonkers. He's so good at finding the best players. We were like, 'We'd love to have the best French horn player.'

*(Horns)*

She came in. 'We'd love to get the best trombone players.'

*(Trombone)*

They both came in.

When the breakdown happens, and I've just dropped it an octave, "Shut up and go to bed," he builds the tension in that moment.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Shut up and go to bed / Viva Las Vengeance")*

But the punches that you hear, and they're all over this album, they're some of my favorite little things that you can hear.

That's us punching the tape, and so like you're hearing, sometimes it'll cut off the top end of something like that first little note

'Cause like, we're recording it also on another track that has this other thing that we're stacking.

That's the system. That's how the tape machine works.

You know, Jake and I, we love skateboarding. And so, the warehouse that we recorded, the whole purpose behind it was to stack the gear against the walls and put it in the center of the room with the console, so that we could skate around all this stuff because I, I was like, I'm not gonna sit around in this room all day and not be able to skateboard.

And if we can work while we're skating, that's gonna be perfect.

So we built this thing we called 'The Moat'; Just a perfect circle around all the gear, and we're just skating around. And Mike Viola comes into the equation, and he's like, I've never skateboarded.

And so we're teaching him to skateboard.

And so everybody's skating in this moat.

And it really is conducive to creativity.

That's why we, we hung out a lot. And I wasn't planning on an album. We literally just had a plan of like, "Hey, let's just hang out. We've got this studio, let's just go mess around, dude. Like, let's just go have fun. It's fun hanging out.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "Shut up and go to bed / Viva Las Vengeance")*

So that's what we did. And then songs came out of it, just because we were having the best time of our lives.



*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

*(Vocals: "But it can't hurt to try")*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Viva Las Vengeance" by Panic at the Disco, in its entirety.

*("Viva Las Vengeance" by PANIC! AT THE DISCO)*

Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information. You can find links to buy or stream Viva Las Vengeance, and you can watch the music video.

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were created by me. I produced with Craig Eley, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker and Mary Dolan.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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