

Song Exploder
Santigold - Ushers of the New World
Episode 242

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.

Santigold is a singer, songwriter, and producer. She's put out four albums since 2008, and she's been featured as a collaborator on songs with Jay-Z, the Beastie Boys, Diplo, and more.

In this episode, Santi takes apart her song "Ushers of the New World," from her 2022 album *Spirituals*. She made it with some other collaborators she's worked with before, including Grammy-winning producer Rostam, and producer Ricky Blaze. She told me about how she tries to channel her gut instincts, and how she wanted to transform some of the darkest feelings of 2020 into something galvanizing.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: 'Cause time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world) / The new world / Your time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world) / The new world / Gonna make it right")

Santigold: My name is Santigold.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(demo loop)

This song started with an email from Ricky Blaze, who I first met through Diplo back in like, 2010. I remember Diplo being like, Hey, there's this young producer and he lives in Brooklyn, but his family's Jamaican and like, I think you'll really like his music. And so I met him and we ended up doing the song Disparate Youth together.

But I got an email and he was like, Yeah, here's some new tracks.

And it was late, and I was tired.

But for some reason I was just like, Let me just before I go to bed, let me just hit play.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(demo loop)

It was basically just a loop, with a little bit of drums and some synths.

What I liked about the initial track from Ricky is, it's got this really slow, like almost push and pull. Like, it almost sounds like it's sluggish. You feel like you're moving through somewhere,

And the way it spoke to me was like an urgency about the future, but it felt really soft... like a very gentle conversation about the urgency.

And I was like, *Whoa*.

When that happens, I have to record something immediately,

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Demo vocals: "Good god it makes me sick...")

If I have the impulse, I just quickly just record. Straight away. On the computer.

This is like (*chuckles*) so wrong as an analogy, but like, if you're about to throw up and you're like, I need a trash can right now, cuz you know it's coming and you have to have the thing right then, or else you miss it.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(demo continues)

I'm like the sloppiest music-maker ever. I don't care about the quality of my recording, I just want the idea.

So I get my little headphones, and I just sing a melody.

So then, the next step is very strange. I literally write down what it sounds like the gibberish is saying. I listen back and I'm like, What does it sound like? And it's words that don't exist. And I'll write them down.

But then what I do is, I go about trying to fill in the gibberish words with real words that actually fit with the same rhythm, obviously, the same consonants. It's really like a puzzle.

Sometimes there's a couple words that do exist, and I'll write them down. Like, "Good god it makes me sick," sounded like it's saying that.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Demo vocals: "Good god it makes me sick...")

Well, I like that line! Let's keep it.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Demo vocals: "Good god it makes me sick / Can feel the weight of it / Harnessing the wind to fly / I carry too much inside")

There was definitely protests taking place when I wrote this, and I was looking for some levity – not in an escapist way, but in a way so I could see forward, in a way that gave me peace and hope, in a time that felt really hopeless.

The pandemic had already begun. There was mixed messaging that was coming about, like people's safety and just wanting to keep the economy going... Just really not putting people and our well-being first.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "I don't buy what they all say / Spend your money, take the hit / While you gather they are far (so far) / Risk it all to save their day")

I had insomnia, like really bad.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "In the night I lay awake")

And I was having trouble processing it all and knowing what to do.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "This time if I'ma make it / We gotta take it and we're running side by side")

We have to work together. There's no way towards the future that we want if we're not gonna build it together.

And I did have to work on that chorus a bit.

The first thing I came up with was the (sings) "Well time is up, you see we coming, it's our world", and I was like, Oh, I like that.

But then I had this other idea that was (sings) "Ushers of"

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "We're the ushers of / The new world")

and then I was like, Ooh, they can go together.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "Your time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world) / The new world / Gonna make it right")

My mom's church that she went to, I'm from Philadelphia, and her church was really boring, and I did not like going... *(laughs)*

But my dad's family was from Baltimore, and his grandmother was a pastor at this church, and then his aunt was the organist.

And I loved this church in Baltimore! You know, we didn't go that often but when we went, wow, it was such an event.

It was like the ushers in white, and the people would be catching the spirit, and Holy Ghost, and jumping up and speaking in tongues, and fainting, and the ushers would grab 'em and fan 'em! It was exciting.

And so there was this image that just kept coming back to me for this record, of these ushers all in white, holding up this person as they're transcending, as they're just beyond, you know, outside of their bodies and just going to another dimension.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "Cause time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world) / The new world")

We're the ushers of the new world. We are the ones that are gonna bring the new world that we want to live in.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "Your time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world) / The new world / Gonna make it right")

Being locked up in your house, it was getting increasingly hard to balance all the demands of being a mom because I had three kids, my twins had just turned two, so I wasn't like, *I'm gonna get up and work on a song today!* You know, it was more like, *I just gotta get outta here!* So at some point I was like, I'm gonna record this whole album.

My family ended up going to Canada. We actually drove up to Canada in an RV, and we went to Squamish, which was in British Columbia. We intended to only stay for like, eight weeks. And we ended up staying there for five months.

And I ended up shipping my music equipment out and renting a cabin in the woods where I really got into working on the record. And so, by then we had a babysitter. You know, my mom also came. So I was able to actually go to work for like, you know, a good eight hours a day sometimes.

I realized that making the music was me weaving my own lifeline during this time.

So I think being in Canada in particular and finishing the music of the song really helped solidify where I wanted to go with the production.

And I worked with producers virtually.

I called Rostam, who I'd known since he was in Vampire Weekend in the beginning, and who I've worked with before. He's one of my favorite people to work with. And Rostam did a lot.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(bass guitar)

The bassline there? That's Rostam.

He added drums.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(drums)

We use a lot of Ricky's original drums, too.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(drums)

You know, I grew up listening to a lot of, like, Fela Kuti and stuff like that where it's just like, you got all these parts coming in, but it's not necessarily big chord changes. It's just like you're adding parts and then things fall out and then the rhythm changes.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(hi-hat rhythm change)

And so I tend to bring vocal elements like

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh, ooh")

And so I just build, and so that it feels like you've entered a different space.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh, ooh")

But then when we got to the bridge, I'm like, it's a little boring. It just needs a little thing.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "We make 'em stop while we can / We gotta make it right")

I ended up having a producer named Psymun that I worked with go through this song and see if there's anything that you can do.

And what I learned about Psymun is he's like a vocal genius. Like he can do all kinds of crazy cool things with your vocals and make them feel like instruments.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

(Vocals: "We make 'em stop while we can / We gotta make it right")

And he did a couple things, but that's the thing I kept, 'cuz I was like, I love that right here. You can't understand what it's saying, but you feel it.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

("Can" echoing)

I often use multiple producers on one track because sometimes what I'm looking for is beyond what just I can do.

And it's beyond what just one producer can do. And it's the actual merging of all the different skill sets that makes it what it is. And I think that that is kind of key to

what makes a Santigold song a lot of the time, is being able to bring different people in to bring these little, special skills to a song.

Sometimes, when you're working with people that do a lot of pop music, it's like, for the transition into the chorus, they'll be like always put the same type of *whooooosh* sound

(*Sound effect: "whoosh"*)

and I'm like, *UGH, I don't wanna hear that.*

I'm like, Why don't we put some like, you know, atmosphere or like Marvin Gaye when he's got the party in the background and stuff like that. I love the idea of putting some environment in, not some fake environment. Like put some people in there, put some environment as a lift.

(*"Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD*)

(*crowd noise*)

I love group vocals.

A lot of my vocals I record as if I'm a group, I, I'll do like multiple vocals and don't make 'em very tight, cuz I want it to sound like I'm several women.

I don't have one of those. African American Gospel, you know, tradition voices. I don't sing like that. My, to me, when I hear the African women or the Jamaican women, I'm like, That's my voice. I'm like them, which is different. It's a different style of singing and different style of vocalizing.

(*"Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD*)

(*Vocals: "Cause time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world)
The new world / Your time is up, you see we coming / We're the ushers of (it's our world)
The new world / Gonna make it right "*)

I make songs about social issues, and that's partially because of the music I grew up listening to.

I grew up listening to music about change, whether it was Marvin Gaye, whether it was Nina Simone, whether it was Salt N Pepa, and Queen Latifah, that music was about change. That's what I learned music was, growing up.

And so this is a, it's a rally cry. This is a song about the need for us to come together and create the future that we need.

This is a protest. Like we're we're using our voice, We're fighting for, for the things that matter.

It's not like, hey, it's only us, and not them. It can be everybody. Cuz it needs to be – it needs to be all of us.

If you can understand what I'm saying, and if you can feel the urgency, and the necessity of us being able to salvage what we've got here and make it work?

That's who I'm singing to.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Ushers of the New World", by Santigold, in its entirety.

("Ushers of the New World" by SANTIGOLD)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/santigold for more information. You can find links to buy or stream "Ushers of the New World."

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

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.