

**Song Exploder**  
**Son Lux - This Is A Life**  
**Episode 245**

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.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a sci-fi comedy independent film that came out in the spring of 2022. It's a huge hit that made over \$100M at the box office, and it's already been named the best movie of the year by a bunch of publications and awards organizations.

The movie stars the legendary actress Michelle Yeoh, and it was directed by the Daniels, the directing duo of Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert. The score for the film is by the band Son Lux. And in addition to the score, Son Lux also made the original song for the film's end credits: It's called "This is a Life," and it features two prestigious guest vocalists: David Byrne of the Talking Heads, and Mitski.

For this episode, I spoke to Ryan Lott from Son Lux, and the Daniels. Ryan tells the story of how the song was created, with his bandmates, and Mitski, and David Byrne, and Daniels all adding to it and shaping it.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*( Vocals: "This is a life / (Every possibility) / Free from destiny / (I choose you, and you choose me) / Not only what we sow / (Every space and every time) / Not only what we show / (That we know) This is a light"*)

Ryan: This is Ryan Lott from Son Lux.

So Son Lux is Rafiq Bhatia, Ian Chang, and me.

We were in New York, doing a bunch of recording for what was going to be our next record.

And our manager reached out and was like, hey, these guys, the Daniels, they're interested in you guys scoring their next project.

Daniel K: Hello, this is the voice of Daniel Kwan

Daniel S: And this is Daniel Scheinert. I don't sound that different. *(chuckles)*

Ryan: We had an initial call with Daniels, and they pitched the idea to us. It didn't really make a lot of sense, but it sounded super fascinating.

Daniel S: It's a sci-fi action adventure where a middle-aged woman gets taken on a journey across the multiverse.

But she mostly gets freaked out about the lives she could have led, and about the overwhelming number of options out there. And the whole movie is an adventure, trying to engage with what it feels like to be alive today, and to be overwhelmed. And how do you figure out how to love, in the noise.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

Ryan: So then after the call they sent us the script. And there was no way to anticipate what was on those pages.

I thought my PDF was broken. I'm like, this page can't come after that page (*chuckles*). You know what I mean? So I, like, really thought it was broken, or like, something was weird.

And I, like, checked in with the guys, I was like, "Yo, have you guys started to read this yet?" Rafiq laughed his ass off. Like he, he couldn't put it down. But like, I didn't really get it at first.

I couldn't keep up with it.

By the time I made it through, I said to myself, "Would've been cool to make a movie with the Daniels. Too bad this movie is never gonna get made." [*chuckles*] You know, that was definitely my position. Nobody is gonna make this movie.

And really, it wasn't until they were like, "Guys, we got Michelle Yeoh." Then it was like, Wait, what? So this movie's actually gonna get made. Like, we're gonna actually do this. All right, let's go!

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

In the midst of it, we were staring down a cue sheet of over a hundred cues, which is a really crazy amount of cues for a single film.

There's an hour and 50 minutes of original music in the movie.

And, at some point, we knew it was time to start considering whether or not there was gonna be a special song for the end credits.

More often than not, what happens with an end credits is that a music editor can create a montage of music from the film, or it's a song from an artist. And, sometimes it's an original song, but it's like, it's never the composer gets to also write a song for the end credits.

But we wanted to claim that space. This very precious moment following this crazy movie.

Hrishikesh: Here's Daniel Kwan again.

Daniel K: I was like, I want this to be sort of like, the 90s end credits song, the Celine Dion at the end of Titanic. But what is the Son Lux version of that? We gave 'em permission to be more emotional and more vulnerable and, and kind of turn it into like a pop ballad.

Ryan: And so, we thought it would be really amazing to create a duet. It felt really consistent with the story of this film, where there's a hard-fought, and hard-won, reconciliation between two individuals that are coming from very different perspectives.

And that was kind of my concept for the song: What if it was a duet that felt like two very different voices. Two different perspectives on the same song, happening at the same time.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*strings\**

I wasn't gonna sing it. My voice just didn't feel like it was gonna be right for the end credits song.

And right around that time, Kwan sent us his little Spotify, like, screenshot, of like, his top artists that year that he had been listening to.

And I was like, oh, Mitski! Let's see if Mitski would be interested in singing this end credits song. So we got on Zoom with her and Daniels, and she was super into it.

And then it was just like, man, it sure would be amazing to get David Byrne, you know.... What if it was David Byrne and Mitski? That's so like, not expected, but that would be so amazing! (*chuckles*)

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*strings\**

So we, we reached out to David Byrne, you know? I think we heard back within like 24 hours. He must have, like, watched it that night.

Maybe it was my excitement, but I had been imagining in my head, like, a party song.

But when we got on that first call, David chimed in early and he was like, it needs to be a song that just lets you sit. It can't be fast, it can't be loud, it can't be, you know, celebratory. It actually needs to be like a warm embrace, and just give us space to resonate with this movie.

And as soon as he said that, I was like, oh, he's a hundred percent right.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*piano chords\**

Daniel S: We always knew we wanted the very end of the movie to be that shot of Michelle. And for there to be a, like a big hit. A big, maximalist hit.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*(Vocals: "Ohhhhhhhh" / This is a life")*

This was a song that came so fast. I have a voice memo.

Sitting at my synth, and I'm just playing and singing.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*(Vocals: Not only what we sow / Not only what we show / Ahhhhhh! / This is a life...)*

There's a discovery that happens in the film, that life is bigger than you could ever imagine.

And so, "This is a life" – that sentiment came out screaming at me right away.

I had spent so many hours with this film. Hundreds. Maybe that's why the lyrics came really fast to me, because it wasn't like I needed to spend time discovering the spirit of something that is emanating from it.

It was like, I'm already in its glow.

**\*demo piano fades out\***

You know, I, I had been listening to a lot of Mitski, so I was like, thinking in her range and in, like, some of her phrasing and stuff.

**\*demo 3rd verse\***

*(Vocals: "Slow and sudden miracles / View of other worlds / From our window sills")*

So, when I sent it over, I said, here's a file of just like a, a piano demo without my voice. So you can, if you want, you can write your own lyrics and your own melody, or whatever.

Cuz I, I mean, I wrote it for her, but that doesn't mean I got it all right.

But she was super into just singing it how I wrote it.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

**\*Mitski a capella vocals\***

*(Vocals: "This is a life")*

Which was, like, a very big compliment.

*(Vocals "Free from destiny")*

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

**\*piano\***

That is the piano stem from the recording, which is basically a note-for-note replay following the voice memo, because part of what made that initial voice memo special, right, is that it gives and takes and it feels kind of messy, in the way that the movie does, frankly. And in order to preserve the feeling of that one moment, I actually created a click track that speeds up and slows down where I sped up and slowed down.

And this piano in the recording is one I designed virtually. Usually I like to accentuate the mechanics of the piano, because I have such an affection for spending so much time in front of the instrument. You can hear the hammers and the key releases.

So, the half of it before David's part just kind of came fully formed.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*(Vocals: "This is a light")*

But I left space in the vocal

*(Vocals: "Free from entropy")*

Because I really did want this sense of, like, two melodies having their own space to intersect and alternate, you know, and then David can just go to town.

*(Vocals: "This is a life / (Every possibility) / Free from destiny / (I choose you, and you choose me)")*

It's a very specific task, what David had to do, which is, like, I can only sing here:

And if I do, it has to be kind of on this note.

*(Vocals: "Not only what we sow / (Every space and every time)")*

But, pretty quickly, I think probably within a week or so, he came back with the demo, and it was like, so great.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*(Duet vocals: "Not only what we show / (That we know) / This is a light")*

My bandmates are my favorite musicians. Ian played to the craziest pocket, because it's all built on me just sitting at the piano that one late night, or whatever.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*drums\**

It's not based on how a drummer would play, and yet he made it feel, like, completely natural. That's like, a real, intangible art.

And then Rafiq played to Ian.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*fluttery guitars\**

That's layers of Rafiq's prepared guitar. He puts things, like, between the strings. He's got a great technique for creating a sort of papery, muted sound.

And then, I took recordings of him doing these, like, little fluttery, prepared guitar things. And then I created an instrument out of those recordings, using a software sampler to play back little fragments of recordings at different speeds.

Daniel S: When we first started working with them, we went to Ryan's house and he gave us a tour of some of his gear, where he would take a sample, he'd pull it up in the software, and he'd program it to his keyboard.

And he was demonstrating to us the ways that he can take a sound effect, then warp it and shift it and shrink it and grow it.

Daniel K: He feels like an alchemist. It's really fun.

Danieal S: Yeah. We left and Dan was like, he's like a sound magician. And I remember that being the moment where I was like, I'm so excited to work with these guys.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*string sound\**

Ryan: One of the things I love to do is work in the virtual realm because it means you can capture something about an instrument that is truly unique and truly beautiful and, and can only express itself acoustically, but then harness it to achieve something musically that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*trem-blooms\**

We call those trem-blooms. They feel like these things that are, like, trembling but blooming at the same time. They are Rafiq playing acoustic guitar, strumming through a core *[strum sound]* "frrrrrum" and like doing, like, finger-picking rustles, combined with harps, and then the playback speed has been adjusted to create a sort of, like, crystalline array of feathery, like, shards of light.

Rob Moose on strings.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*strings\**

Rob has a really cool way to make pizzicato feel

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*pizzicato\**

not like pizzicato. Like, it doesn't really sound like you're listening to violins and violas.

And then when you add, if you play those, and Rafiq's bass...

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*pizzicato and bass\**

That is just such a magic combination.

*("This Is A Life" by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*\*strings and bass from intro\**

The Daniels did have one note, and it was super important.

If you listen to the early demos, I'm like, "Aaah" and then I immediately start singing.

Their insight was like, let's just like, let's let the song slip in.

And so, what we did is basically take the pizzicato violin and violas, and Rafiq's bass, just take a cycle. And it just lets us, like, slow our, our pace of our heart a bit.

Daniel K: As they kept adding to it and adding to it, you could feel that it was very small and then allowed, allowed the space for it to become very big. And that, to me, is exciting, cuz that's what the film is all about. It's about the smallest things, and the biggest things,

And then Mitski came up with this beautiful background vocal. She sings, (*sings*) "Sucked into a bagel."

Which has nothing to do with the song. But is a note-for-note quote of Stephanie Hsu's character, in an iconic moment in the movie, where, instead of speaking her line, "Sucked into a bagel," she decided to sing it.



It was just, like, a zany choice that she made on camera.

( *[dialogue from movie with background music]:*

*“If nothing matters, then all the pain and guilt you feel from making nothing of your life... goes away...”*

*[music swells, then abruptly stops]*

*[Stephanie sings] “Sucked... into... a bagel... )*

*[music returns]*

Mitski picked up on that, and had the crazy, beautiful, amazing idea to sing those lyrics in this, like, apex of the song. And that to me was like a master stroke.

*(“This Is A Life” by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

*(Vocals: “Sucked into a bagel” )*

Because this was an end credits song, it had to be done, done, done, when the film is mixed.

So that was like, summer of ‘21, right? But the movie didn't come out until March 11th, I think. It was the opening film at the South by Southwest Film Festival. And it was a big theater, you know, I think it was like 1500 people, you know, watching this movie together, gasping, laughing, crying.

And, in the wake of that movie, as the credits came rolling and the song started playing, I was so relieved. Because, for years, I protected my heart from having too high hopes, because I believed in it so much. And like, the most heartbreaking thing would be if people didn't get this movie, or if nobody saw it. But when we saw it, together with all those people, and felt the impact, I knew. I knew people were gonna get this movie, and I knew people were gonna see it.

And so I, yeah, I, I started to let myself celebrate.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's, “This is a Life,” by Son Lux, featuring Mitski and David Byrne, in its entirety.

*(“This Is A Life” by SON LUX ft. Mitski and David Byrne)*

For more on Son Lux, and Everything Everywhere All at Once, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "This is a Life," and you can watch the trailer for the movie. You can also find Mitski's own episode of Song Exploder from a few years ago.

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.