

Song Exploder
Muna - What I Want
Episode 248

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

MUNA is a trio from Los Angeles, made up of Katie Gavin, Josette Maskin, and Naomi McPherson. They've been making music together since 2013, when they met in college. Their third album, which is self-titled, came out in 2022, and Rolling Stone, Stereogum, the Guardian, and more, called it one of the best albums of the year. Consequence of Sound called MUNA the 2022 Band of the Year.

I talked to MUNA about the song "What I Want," which they co-wrote with Leland. Leland is an artist and songwriter whose other credits include Selena Gomez, Charli XCX, and Troye Sivan. In this episode, Katie, Jo, and Naomi, along with Leland, tell the story of how the song came together, from the original demo to the final version, and you'll find out how a band that doesn't really party ended up writing a party banger.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I want the full effects, I wanna hit it hard / I wanna dance in the middle of a gay bar / Ooh ooh ooh, that's what I want / There's nothing wrong with what I want / Yeah, yeah")

Katie: Hi, I'm Katie. In the band, I am the singer, and also the songwriter.

Josette: I'm Josette. I play guitar.

Naomi: I'm Naomi.

I made the first iteration of the beat,

("What I Want" by MUNA)

at the end of summer 2020. It was very simple. It was the bassline and the drums, and then that kind of ascending, like, pad thing. I didn't flesh it out a lot. 'Cause I think I was like, thinking it was, like, just fine, and I sent it to Katie just being like, maybe she'll like this.

Katie: I remember responding to that one. It was a slapper. It was a little slapper.

I was in, like, a new relationship and I was just excited by the prospect of, like, putting something on the next MUNA record in acceptance of the desires in

yourself that you previously might have had some judgment over. For me, it was just about being in acceptance of my more hedonistic side.

And then I had a Zoom session scheduled with Leland.

Leland: My name is Leland.

Katie: Leland is a friend of ours, who came into our life... a couple years ago?

Naomi: Mm-hmm.

Josette: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Leland: I executive produced the music for a TV show called "Love, Victor," and I would put an original song in every episode from an LGBTQIA+ artist.

We all wrote a song that, unfortunately, ended up not making it in. But that was our first collaboration.

Katie: He just had, like, a warmth about him, and he was always very, very kind.

Josette: I don't know many people like him where, he's trying to like, help other queer musicians out.

Leland: I started out as just a genuine fan of their music. And I feel so fortunate, 'cause my relationship has the potential to go beyond fan and, when it makes sense, to potentially collaborate.

So Katie and I wrote over Zoom.

Katie: When he asked like, what do you got? I was like, I don't have a title or, like solid phrases, but, I want something that feels really unapologetic and that feels fun.

You know, he's really comfortable co-writing and I'm not as comfortable, but I'm comfortable with Leland.

So what we ended up doing was taking five or 10 minutes with the beat, like, by ourselves, off of Zoom.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

Katie: And then we like, came back and did some show-and-tell stuff.

He had, like, the melody.

Leland: I was hearing (*sings*) "That's what I want, there's nothing wrong, with what I want," and I knew I would love to hear Katie sing something like that, in her tone. I could just hear it in my head.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "That's what I want / There's nothing wrong with what I want / Yeah, yeah")

Katie: It was very pandemic-informed, where it was kind of like, oh, I miss being out and around people.

Leland: We found the lyric together, "I want to dance in the middle of a gay bar," and found the melody and the shape to go with it; how we were gonna be able to emphasize the word "gay."

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I wanna dance in the middle of a gay bar")

Katie: It was, like, kind of scary for me. Maybe part of it is just being raised Irish Catholic, and also maybe carrying around internalized homophobia. And so, part of what was interesting about writing with Leland was like, we're two queer people.

Leland: Katie and I really approached this song from a similar mindset.

I grew up in a very structured environment where certain parts of me, out of necessity, needed to be repressed. And so, I've spent more of my life not being myself, than being myself.

Approaching this song from that place, I think it allowed Katie and I to not overthink the lyric.

Katie: I remember a specific moment where we were coming up with the second half of the chorus, like **sings** "I want the fireworks."

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I want the fireworks, I want the chemistry / I want that girl right over there to wanna date me")

And I was like, oh, I can't say "fireworks". That's so, like, obvious. But he was like, no, we're saying fireworks. Like, you want the fireworks! You want the chemistry. It's fine to say the thing that's like, down the middle.

I remember feeling kind of inspired by how "main pop girl," the lyric and melody sounded. And I was like, oh, I wanna do a pre-chorus that has like, some type of, you know, (*sings*) "too-too-too." I was like, I'm gonna do one of those moments,

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I've spent way too, too, too many years not knowing what / What I wanted, how to get it, how to live it and now / I'm gonna make up for it all at once / 'Cause that's / That's just what I want")

Leland: Once we got the complete thought, I was like, okay, this feels great.

Katie: And when I have a verse, pre-chorus, and chorus, the songwriting session is over. I'm like, a second verse, I, I'll deal with later.

And then, I sent it to the bros.

Naomi: When I first heard the song, I was stoked. But I was like, oh, those drums sound like shite. They have to go, like, NOW.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

Naomi: I remember I had a day where I worked on it in Ally's guest bedroom.

Katie: Ally is Naomi's partner.

Naomi: Yeah, and I fleshed out the drums. New drums and new bass sounds.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

Naomi: My dad's a drummer. My mom's a bass player. So that's just like where my head is at, most of the time.

And then, yeah, there's like a little loop that cuts in and out in the chorus,

("What I Want" by MUNA)

that added a little bit of motion that wasn't there in the verses.

And then the little camera sounds?

("What I Want" by MUNA)

**camera click)*

I just liked it.

After the first time you hear her say, "I want the full effects," felt like 90s supermodel energy. Like Shalom Harlow, like Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista era. Like, tearing down the runway. Killing it.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I want the full effects / I wanna hit it hard")

Josette: We started working at our friend Joanna's studio. She has, like, a little place like under her house and that's where, we call it princess work where we work from like 12 to 5.

Katie: And we, we came up with that string moment, like with the sample that kind of sounded like the violins that are in "Toxic."

Hrishikesh: That's "Toxic," by Britney Spears. And I know most people probably know that, but I just wanted to clarify, just in case. Okay, as they were saying...

Naomi: We all love "Toxic."

Josette: Yeah.

Naomi: It's just truly one of the best pop songs ever.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(string sample)

Once that was done, it was like, well now we just have to like, figure out what the hell we're gonna do on guitar.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(guitar sample)

Josette: Especially in a pop song like this, I think we're adding, like, single stacked notes as a way to like, create movement. So we'll like record like a bunch of me going up like a single note.

(guitar sample)

Josette: Sometimes when we're recording vocals, Katie either wants, like, our input or she wants us to leave her completely alone.

And I think this was one of the times, because I don't think any of us knew how difficult this song was gonna be to sing. But, oh my god. It was insane.

Katie: I got pissed.

Josette: Yeah, you were, you were angry at the mic.

Katie: But it was because I didn't feel like I was doing good enough.

There's not a lot of space to breathe in this song.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh, ooh, That's what I want / There's nothing wrong with what I want / Yeah, yeah")

And then that also has like, a mental effect of like, I can start to feel, like, panic.

I just get it in my head and then, and then sure enough, like, I can't sing something, cuz I'm scared to go for it.

And so, I know that what I really need is for my friends to tell me that I'm, I'm doing a good job. And so I said, "I need everyone to be saying something nice to me!" And that's what happened.

Our bassist who engineers for us in the studio a lot, he, this was the day where he said -

Naomi: Where you asked for a compliment.

Katie: Yeah. And he said, this changed his life. So... Because he didn't know that you can do that.

Josette: Ask for a compliment or something. Ask for support. You're, you're great at that, especially in those moments.

Naomi: Yeah.

By the end of that day though, we had the vocal.

Josette: Yes.

Naomi: Like, it was so clear.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I want that girl right over there to wanna date me / Ooh ooh ooh, that's what I want / There's nothing wrong with what I want / Yeah, yeah")

Katie: There were just a lot of hours spent putting in work, to do little changes.

But I would say that writing the bridge was my respite from the endless sea of details.

I really just wanted to say -

Josette: Psychosomatic.

Katie: Psychosomatic, yeah.

Naomi: I just remember her literally saying out loud, I really want the bridge to use the word psychosomatic. And we were like, okay.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "My hands are shaking, it's psychosomatic / That's how bad I want what I want / What I, what I want / I'm gonna take it, I'm just gonna grab it / That's how bad I want what I want / What I, what I want")

Katie: And I knew that I wanted it to go back into like *(sings)* "Too, too, too many years."

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "Too, too, too many years / I've cried too, too, too many tears")

Naomi: This is when we were vibrating at an extremely high level.

Josette: Yeah. Doing, doing flips.

Naomi: She was singing the lyrics and we were just like, this is gonna take us back into the chorus. That is so fun.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "But now I'm gonna make up for it all at once / 'Cause that's")

add harmonies

("That's just what I want / I want the full effects, I wanna hit it hard / I wanna dance in the middle of a gay bar / Ooh ooh ooh, that's what I want / There's nothing wrong with what I want / Yeah, yeah")

Katie: This song needed to be bombastic. Harmony stacks just help make a moment bigger.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "Cause she's got what I want, want want / What I want, want, I want")

Katie: None of us really party at all, so it is funny that we have this song, like I think we had a lot of conversations around, like, what if this is gonna make people think that it's okay to go and get really fucked up all the time?

And, like, from my mid-20s to, I just turned 30, and that's kind of been like an on-and-off, like, oh I'm sober for a while and then I'm not sober. And I think just after testing it out for a few years, like, I, I like it more being sober.

But, there's something very freeing about, just being like, okay, I'm using the metaphor of the party, to still try and express something that's true for me.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

(Vocals: "I've spent way too, too, too many years not knowing what / What I wanted, how to get it, how to live it and now / I'm gonna make up for it all at once")

Naomi: Also, like, honoring that, nightlife as having such a fundamental and important history for queer people and marginalized people to like, be able to gather and feel safe.

Leland: I was co-writing it as a fan, and co-writing it as a gay guy who wants to be absolutely euphoric, losing my mind in the middle of a gay bar, dancing to this song.

And that has happened multiple times now, and it truly is the best feeling.

Katie: I remember playing it for my little sister and her saying like, yeah, I would think that you, like, partied a lot.

Josette: We're in our slut era without being sluts.

Naomi. Yeah.

Katie: That's all it takes.

Josette: I think it's like slut in the heart.

Katie: Slut in the heart. If, if you're also a slut in the heart of your best friends.

Josette: Yeah, absolutely. And we're sluts -

Katie: - in each other's hearts.

Josette: - to each other. Yeah, absolutely.

Katie: Hmm.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "What I Want," by MUNA, in its entirety.

("What I Want" by MUNA)

For more, visit songexploder.net/MUNA. You'll find links to buy or stream "What I Want," and you can watch the music video.

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and the show's theme music and logo were created by me.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.