

**Song Exploder**  
**Yaeji - Passed Me By**  
**Episode 251**

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.

Yaeji is a singer, songwriter, and producer from New York. When she was a kid, she moved between Queens, Atlanta, and Seoul, Korea. When she was in college, she started DJing, and releasing her own music. That led to two EPs in 2017, and since then, she's also done remixes for Dua Lipa, Charli XCX, and Robyn. Yaeji won the International Breakthrough Award at the AIM Awards in 2020. And this week, she's releasing her debut album, *With A Hammer*.

For this episode, I talked to Yaeji about her song "Passed Me By." She sings in Korean and in English, and she told me how using both languages gives her a broader palette to express her ideas.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*(Vocals: "I like flipping the pages and feeling / The physical weight of how much time has / Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by / Na na na na, na na na na, na na na na")*

Yaeji: My name is Yaeji.

I was in London winter of 2021, and I was kicking it with my friend Matt. And we were revisiting Kid Cudi's catalog, for some reason.

And in the track Kid Cudi made with MGMT, "Pursuit of Happiness," there's a synth that recurs throughout the whole track that... I can't sing it well. *(chuckles)*

I think it kind of goes like, *(vocalizes synth noises)*.

And it, like, repeats over and over. And that synth alone does so much, in my opinion, and says so much.

I remember that being the spark for the first synth element.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*synth\**

So that's the first piece of sound I laid down. In June of 2022, so actually, quite a lot of time had passed. But – I don't know why – I still feel like there was a throughline.

I was born in Queens, New York, and I was raised in America for a bit before moving to Korea for the first time. So I have memories of both, but from different time periods.

I had done a lot of traveling back and forth to Korea and New York writing this album.

And June was a time when I wrote a lot of music in Brooklyn, which I was finding difficult for a few years.

But I had just gotten a new synth at the time.

A Waldorf synth, called Quantum. It's really, really powerful, and came with hundreds and hundreds of presets.

And so, I'm just flipping through presets, kind of jumping to random ones

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*synth\**

and playing where my fingers go.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*synth\**

And then from there, I keep layering and keep improvising.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*chord stabs\**

I'm not classically trained. I never fully got to study music theory. I picked up some instruments growing up, piano and flute, but I truly forgot how to play any of those instruments.

And so, my relationship with music when I started making it, which was in early adulthood, had been very ignorant, in this freeing way, where I just trust my feeling and my ears.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*intro bass and chord stabs\**

When I'm coming up with the vocals and lyrics, it is a lot of trial and error, just like how I write synths and drums and everything else.

And then I have an idea of what kind of flow I want to be delivering with my voice.

So then in my little notebook, I'll underline a bunch of syllables that I want, kind of like hangman. And I'm trying to fill in that many syllables.

So it's almost like this instrumental, percussive approach to using my voice, but then it's also a limiting thing and a prompt.

And that's usually how I write lyrics.

*(Voice memo: "Today has been a little weak, a little strong / I light a little fire / Anything that touches me will evaporate / And fly higher and higher")*

The first line I wrote was: "Today is a little weak, a little strong / I light a little fire / Anything that touches me will evaporate / And go higher and higher."

That day when I started writing the lyrics, I felt a bit of anger. It wasn't the typical type of *(angry noise)* anger of like, *I'm gonna punch something (chuckles)*.

It was more like a slow churning, brewing type of feeling.

It started from anger. Because during lockdown, we were cut off from distractions and had to face ourselves.

So a lot of past memories surfaced, and from there, I felt anger for my younger self and all the things I've experienced and suppressed up until now.

I had a deep, period of confusion, to then gaining the energy again to realize, in order to love myself, I have to treat myself like another person, cuz that's always come more easily than just loving myself straight up.

So, I realized a form of loving myself is looking straight in the eyes of younger me, who went through things I did not want to remember, and therefore I had forgotten about until this moment.

*("Passed Me By" by YAEJI)*

*\*drums\**

The drumbeat itself – It's one of my favorite things about this song.

The snare (*snare noise*) is like, really cathartic and satisfying. Almost like when you're, like, opening a Coke bottle or, you know that feeling of, *That's really hitting*.

This sample was in there throughout all the demo stages.

And then I remember thinking and discussing, should we have a drummer friend recreate this?

But then, ultimately I decided against it because there's so many things about this specific sample that's weird, that makes it the one for this song.

When I was writing this album, I was in general finding a lot of old music to listen to and watch. Because over the pandemic, it was just hard to intake new material.

I was seeking comfort in nostalgia only.

I was listening to Korean hip hop from the nineties.

*(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)*

*\*drums + lead synth\**

I actually love just hearing those two things together. That straight up sounded like nineties hip hop. (*Chuckles*).

*(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)*

*(Vocals: “How it passed me by one by one / 못 알아볼 뻔했어”)*

The reason I sing in English and Korean has changed for me throughout the years.

Korean was the first language I chose to sing in, because it felt private to me. I had a lot of friends who couldn't speak it, and it would make me less shy about the subject matters I was singing about, and it made me feel free.

*(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)*

(Vocals: “참지않고 다보여준다 상상해봤었지 / 그런데 나는 / 울지않고 어깨피고 걷자 말했었었지 / 그런데 나는”)

I learned, as I wrote more songs, I love how Korean sounds, phonetically and sonically, texturally. So it became an instrument.

And now, singing in two languages gives me a broader way of expression with words than, you know, singing in one language.

But also, I feel like a slightly different person depending on which language I speak.

So it helped convey this duality.

Like, at the end of the intro verse, I say:

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “여기서 / I learned mother nature / I’m sorry, 난 무능력해”)

That sentence is a real blend of Konglish, (*chuckles*) which I rarely do. And it felt nice to do that.

The last line there is “난 무능력해” and it just means *I’m powerless*.

But the way it hits in Korean is so different.

Same with the line before that,

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “어렸을 때부터 나는 / 날씨에 기분이 좌지우지 됐지”)

I’m just talking about the weather changing and mood swings, and I don’t think it would’ve hit the same way I wanted it to get across if I had said that in English.

And it’s also tied to specific memories I have of while I was in Korea and feeling that way.

I do wonder if the need for Korean in some songs comes from me wanting to stay in touch with my Korean side while I’m in the States.

(Voice memo: “참지않고 다보여준다 상상해봤었지 / 그런데 나는 / 울지않고 어깨피고 겹자 말했었었지 / 그런데 나는 / I like flipping the pages / And feeling the physical weight of how much time has / Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by”

The lyrics came specifically from me flipping through and touching the diary I had completed from the previous year.

I journal in Korean.

And the weight of the pages from those diaries that had been filled up with so many thoughts, so many feelings, and just documentation of what I ate, who I was with, what we did.

When I hold it the next year, it, it feels really wild. And it feels really physical and heavy.

But in that voice note, I can hear a lot of things that actually ended up differently in the final version.

Like, singing *Passed me by* didn't feel right.

(Voice memo: “Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by...”)

Singing it almost gave it too much of a personality or almost guided it too much to be a certain feeling.

And, what had passed me by was the old memories I hadn't acknowledged and all the "past me"-s that I hadn't acknowledged. And I was like, how do I get that across? And so I just kept repeating, *Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by* – almost like a tongue twister.

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by”)

But I pitched down my vocals, and that's how I got the sound.

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “Passed me by, passed me by, passed me by, passed me by”)

I like all the weirdness that comes from semitones rubbing up against, you know, other synths and melodies I have.

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “I like flipping the pages and feeling / The physical weight of how much time has / Passed me by, Passed me by, Passed me by, Passed me by, Passed me by, Passed me by, Passed me by”)

The last thing that came was the last chorus.

I repeat the same rhythm and melody. But the lyrics change.

So in the first chorus, the English says “How *it* passed me by one by one,”

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “How it passed me by one by one / 못 알아볼 뻔했어”)

“못 알아볼 뻔했어” is *I almost didn't recognize it*. But in Korean, so much of communicating is by reading each other, reading the room. And so the pronoun doesn't have to be specified, at times.

So it's very unclear what I'm referencing, or who I'm referencing.

And then in the final chorus, I say how *she* came to me.

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

(Vocals: “How she came to me, one by one / 못 알아볼 뻔했어”)

So, the Korean part in there is “I almost didn't recognize her.”

It's actually the same lyrics, but in the English the pronoun conveys that it is *she* who I almost couldn't recognize.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. So the English changes, but the Korean is the same, but the Korean changes its meaning because of the context of the English.

Yaeji: Exactly.

Younger me, past me had been there the whole time looking at me, but I had always avoided her existence until now.

(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)

*(“Vocals: “How I missed her so, thank you for (How I missed her so-) / Coming back to me / How she came to me, one by one (How she came to me-) / 못 알아볼 뻔했어 / How I missed her so, thank you for (How I missed her so-) / Coming back to me”)*

This song feels and looks like the moment when I lock eyes with past me and we finally acknowledge each other. That's what "Passed Me By" is about.

Though I had set an intention of it being how anger passes through me, I mean, that prompt doesn't have an answer of, *This is how anger passed through me.*

It was a question to begin with. But I had no idea where the track would head, or how it would end, or what it would mean.

The first day I started the track, I was pissed, and then the last day I'm like crying, thinking about my childhood (*laughs*).

And that's what makes it fun for me too. It's so *real*.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Passed Me By," by Yaeji, in its entirety.

*(“Passed Me By” by YAEJI)*

For more, visit [songexploder.net/Yaeji](http://songexploder.net/Yaeji). You'll find links to buy or stream "Passed Me By."

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

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt).

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.