

**Song Exploder**  
**Madison McFerrin - Run (feat. Bobby McFerrin)**  
**Episode 253**

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.

*("Run" (feat. Bobby McFerrin) by MADISON McFERRIN)*

Madison McFerrin is a singer, songwriter, and producer from New York. She's sung with legends like Aretha Franklin, George Clinton, and De La Soul & The Roots. Madison's first EP came out in 2016, and last week, she released her debut album, *I Hope You Can Forgive Me*. In the years between the EP and the album, Madison started producing her own music. It wasn't really her plan, but something that developed over the course of the pandemic. For this episode, I talked to Madison about a song from her album called "Run." It was inspired by the discovery that she's the descendant of a woman who escaped slavery. And it features guest vocals from Madison's father, Grammy-winner Bobby McFerrin.

*(Vocals: "But I need you to trust me / Let me take you from this place / You don't have to wait but I need you to trust me" )*

Madison: My name is Madison McFerrin.

I'm a live performer. That's the thing that I derive the most joy out of, probably in life, period.

I decided I wanted to be a singer when I was five, which I think really just came from: I like to sing, I see my dad likes to sing, and that's what his job is. So that seems like I could do that, too.

*\*vocal layers\**

So I started doing a capella stuff; vocal layers and vocal harmony, as a live performer. For the first three years of my solo career, I was just doing a capella loops.

*\*vocal layers\**

So with a loop pedal, you know, you start with one layer and as soon as it stops, you have to start the next layer.

*\*vocal layers\**

And then you have to start the next layer, and then the next layer, and then you're kind of locked into that structure that you've made.

*\*vocal layers\**

I didn't want to just do a capella stuff, 'cause I could hear other things in my head. I just didn't know how to get them out. But I didn't start producing until 2020, when I was forced to be at home and not have shows to express my creativity.

But you know when you're learning how to do something new, and it's like you're kind of coming up against a wall for awhile, but then this beat

*\*drums\**

was one of the first beats that I made that I was like, oh, this is actually good.

*\*all drums\**

I was intentionally trying to make something that has a lot of forward momentum, a lot of forward energy.

A lot of people tell me that they listen to my music when they're trying to meditate, or just, you know, relax their mind.

And I think I just wanted to challenge myself to not do the same thing.

So, I was listening to the beat over and over, and I wanted to add some vocal layers.

*\*vocal layers\**

I think it's like five layers or something like that. Very much just like a, this is what's flowing, let me just do it.

*\*vocal layers\**

It was fun.

*\*vocal layers\**

It was originally called "Cramps." I wrote it on a day when I had some like insane period cramps and had eaten like 20mg of an edible or something, just to like, cure the pain, and ended up just hanging out at my computer, really getting into this groove, and then like listening to it for the next week. Just on loop.

*\*vocal layers\**

In May, 2020, I was contacted by a distant cousin on ancestry.com. I had been looking up stuff in my history, just cuz I was interested. And neither of my parents

have had the closest relationships with their immediate family for me to know as much as I would like to, so I went to the internet to try and find some stuff out.

But unfortunately, as a Black American, there isn't all that much information.

And then this cousin, Malcolm, he reached out to me on the website and said, Hey, I have some stories about our family that you might not know, and I'd love to hop on the phone sometime and chat with you.

So we got on the phone.

He told me that our great-great-great grandmother, whose name apparently was Maria, escaped slavery.

Her husband had been sold to another plantation and she went to find him.

I was really taken aback by this information.

Just learning the fact that this woman that I'm descended from took her own freedom into her hands and took that courageous act, was something that really opened my heart, and that was incredibly inspiring.

All of a sudden I got this jolt of energy.

So I revisited this song.

*\*drums\**

Because of the momentum. Because of the movement. I felt like this particular beat lent itself to the idea of this woman running away,

*\*vocal layers\**

The thing that kept coming to mind was, what if I wrote this from the perspective of the Creator trying to give her the strength to run away?

*(Vocals: "Run away / You can stay tonight")*

So from a lyrical standpoint, the story starts with a message from above telling her to run.

Wait until the right moment, but you gotta leave.

*(Vocals: "But disappear before the dawn")*

It really lent itself to be this a capella, choral opening of the calm before the storm.

*\*background vocals\**

Giving the song that meditative moment of, okay, let me get my strength, and my mind, and my heart all aligned so that I can escape this situation.

*\*background vocals\**

So I wanted to start it with this, like, very mellow sonic environment.

I asked my dad to be on it because of the fact that he is also descended from this woman. By doing something together, as her descendants, that was a way to honor my great-great-great grandmother's legacy, because we are more than likely here because of the fact that she made this decision to run away.

And, because he is so incredible at just improvising, if there was any part of Maria that could come out, just through syllables, I wanted him to embody that.

*\*background vocals\**

My dad and I have a very close relationship. I used to be in his band. I've toured with him. I've been in many a concert with him. But we had never collaborated in this fashion before.

We were in his room. And I just played the section he's on, on loop, for about 10 minutes, and pressed record, and just listened.

*\*background vocals\**

The first couple were like, okay, I'm still figuring out the song. But that [vocalizes] "de, de, de, de, de, de, de," came in in one of the go-arounds where he had gotten a lot more comfortable.

He also had done that super low thing another time.

*\*background vocals\**

That's just Bobby McFerrin's range [laughs], ladies and gentlemen.

*(Vocals: "do do do do do do do")*

And I was like, I love both of these. They're both gonna happen [laughs].

*\*background vocals\**

If the lyrics are the Creator, giving her the strength, my dad is like the Juju keeping her going in that moment.

*\*background vocals conclude\**

My favorite line in the whole song is "Take my hand / Let's sing the stars / There's a plan / I wrote it all just for you."

*(Vocals: "Let's sing the stars")*

That's a direct reference to the idea of "Follow the Drinking Gourd." What we refer to as the Big Dipper, for many was referred to as the Drinking Gourd.

Black people had created music to help people understand how to run away.

Music that was created so that people could sing covertly, while giving a message of, if you wanna get out of here: When you look at the night sky, follow that symbol, because the Drinking Gourd was a visual representation of which direction you need to run in, to go north.

I can only imagine the amount of trust that you have to have in yourself, and in a higher power, to escape such a horrific situation. You are choosing to potentially die in the process of leaving, because that prospect is better than staying where you are.

So I thought that the idea of trust was very important.

*(Vocals: "Let me take you from this place / You don't have to wait / But I need you to trust me / When the end is said and done / You won't have to wish that you knew how to run")*

And then my dad comes in and he's like, "Here we go. Let's go."

*(Vocals: "When the end is said and done / You won't have to wish that you knew how to run / When the end is said and done / You won't have to wish that you knew how to run / That you knew how to run")*

We just learn so much about ourselves when we learn about our history, and I feel like Black people in America have particularly been denied that. We don't have the privilege, honestly, knowing where we came from and understanding where we came from, because it's been taken from us, not because we haven't tried.

My grandfather is the first African-American to sign a contract with the Metropolitan Opera. My dad is an 11-time Grammy winner. But I was looking at this census of my dad's grandfather on his father's side. And it was saying, Could they read? Could they write? And it said no for both of them.

And I immediately started crying. You know, this is somebody who, they're not that far away from me. And it really broke my heart. Just the lack of humanity that these people were given.

Even if I don't know the full story of how Maria left, where she went to or any of these things, I could at least honor the fact that she made that choice to leave, period. And I think that this song was an attempt for me to try and connect, at least from a spiritual level, with my ancestors.

*\*vocal layers end\**

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of these ideas and pieces came together in the full song.

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And now, here's "Run" by Madison McFerrin, featuring Bobby McFerrin, in its entirety.

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Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Run."

This episode of Song Exploder 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.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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