

**Song Exploder**  
**Bakar - Hell N Back**  
**Episode 256**

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.

One note before we get started: This episode contains explicit language, and also a mention of suicide. If you or someone you love is having thoughts of suicide, confidential help is available for free. You can call the national suicide prevention lifeline at 988. You can also text the crisis text line. Just text HELLO to 741 741. There's also a comprehensive list of international crisis lines on Wikipedia, and we'll link to that in the show notes. Okay. Here's the episode.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

Bakar is a singer and songwriter from London. In 2018, he put out his first release, Badkid. A year later, he put out the EP, Will You Be My Yellow?, and this September, he's releasing his second full-length album, Halo. One of Bakar's tracks from the EP and the upcoming album is a song called "Hell N Back," which went to number one on Billboard's Triple A Charts, and eventually went platinum. For this episode, Bakar told me how he wrote "Hell N Back", and all the unexpected twists and turns it took.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Could you tell where my head was at when you found me? / Me and you went to hell and back just to find peace / Man, I thought I had everything, I was lonely / Now you're my everything, that was on me")*

Bakar: My name is Bakar.

Hrishikesh: The story starts in 2018.

Bakar: I think there was just a longing in my life in general... Basically in London, like, around that time, my friends were coming out of a period of, like, like a pill epidemic. Downer pills, you know, like Xanax, Valium. And we start shit so early in London, like, by the grace of God hopefully you're out of it by a certain age.

And so I think at that time, we was kind of growing out of that.

I'd done a painting called "Will You Be My Yellow?" It was like, one of two or three paintings I've ever done in my life. I'm no painter.

But I had a friend that, I'd done the painting in his studio. He actually passed away, but he would always encourage me to paint.

And I just covered the whole canvas in yellow. And then with my fingers, I just wrote, "Will you be my yellow?" It, to me, expressed that want for, like, for light.

And then like, I got a phone call to come work in LA, on another artist's project, and so I went.

And I was full of energy. I was jet lagged, but like, I was so excited about being flown to a whole 'nother place to work on music. And Beach Noise, they were the engineers in the sessions.

So after a long day of, like, songwriting and stuff, I'm like – on a cheeky one – like, have you guys got any beats, (chuckles) like. And Matt, one of the guys from Beach Noise, he was engineering me at that moment.

And he's flicking through a couple beats.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - demo beat)*

And one of the ones he plays is the loop.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - demo beat + drums)*

It was like, bare bones of a loop.

It was just me and Matt in the studio. And I sung the chorus, like I had it straight away. Bow.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Could you tell where my head was at when you found me? / Me and you went to hell and back, just to find peace / Man, I thought I had everything, I was lonely / Now you're my everything, that was on me")*

All of that, I did in one.

*(Vocals: "Yeea-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah")*

The words "Could you tell where my head was at when you found me? Me and you went to hell and back just to find peace," they weren't written down. They were just in my head.

I want my hook to be as natural as possible. I don't wanna have to think about a hook.

The hook phase of writing is what comes more natural to me. And that feels like the more subconscious part of me.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Could you tell where my head was at when you found me? / Me and you went to hell and back, just to find peace")*

It's like, "Did you know how fucked up I was when you met me?"  
Like, cuz I know that I was putting on a front that I'm okay, but I'm not.

Me and my friends, we'd been through a lot, man. We had lost a dear friend of ours to suicide like that same year. Maybe just a few months before I wrote that song.

Hrishikesh: Is that the friend who you mentioned, whose studio you were painting in?

Bakar: Yeah, exactly. I got a great group of friends and like, you know, that've come up together. But we got to go through a lot just to get to a space of calm. And I still, at moments, felt alone.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Man, I thought I had everything, I was lonely / Now you're my everything, that was on me")*

I mean, honestly like that whole thing took around 30 minutes, you know what I mean? Did it, moved onto the next beat. Felt good about it, because I thought it was a good idea. But like I said, I'd gone there to write for someone else, so I was more thinking about, hope they like what I've been doing on this other stuff.

So I wasn't even focused on it. And then I went back home (chuckles).

Maybe a month later, one of the members from Beach Noise sent me a text and had sent me like, the snippet, but over like a Coca-Cola advert. And they were like, yo, this feels like that old kind of style advert.

I was like, sick. Yeah, that's cool.

And then they were like, nah, you should do this, bro. Like, you should actually come and finish this.

Cuz honestly at that moment, I didn't really know what to do,

I think I was just fucking around. I was honestly just like, enjoying the tiny little fruits of my labor, like, that I was getting from Badkid, which was my first record. You know, like, Elton John had shouted me out and, like, was singing my song off Badkid on his radio show.

And like, there was just, like, cool things happening to me. But I can honestly say that some of those moments made me a bit complacent.

And so, when he's sending me this stuff, it like, it's sparking something in my brain now. And then I got myself back out there.

And I come back out to LA, just thinking I'm gonna be working in that same studio.

I'm in some, like, shitty hotel in Santa Monica. And they're like, yo, yeah, we're working at this studio. Come up, like, it's gonna be a vibe, whatever, not telling me where I'm going.

They send me the address, I get there, and I'm like, I recognize this place. And it ends up being Shangri-La, Rick Rubin's studio. And I'm a massive Rick Rubin fan, so I'd watched everything about this studio already.

So I'm like, oh my God, I'm at Shangri-La. And I walk in and I'm like, yo, you lot are pieces of shit, like. And they're laughing, because they know what they just did, kind of thing. So they're laughing like, yeah, we're at Shangri-La, we just didn't want to gas you, but, you know what I'm saying?

So I'm just like, this is amazing. Cool.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - loop)*

I wrote the second verse first, and I put that down as the first verse.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "I remember, I remember I was all alone / Late night, you would call my phone / Just to check if I was blessed 'cause you knew I was low / Head gone rolling off the throne / I remember, I remember we was in the park / Late night, made love on the grass / Got my head in the clouds, counting all my stars / In my ears, said the world was ours")*

90% of the time that I'm writing about "you" in the context of a woman, I almost have this woman in my head, right, that is made up of so many women in my life. And those women could be friends of mine. Those women could be women that broke my heart, or I broke their heart. Those women are my aunties. That woman is parts of my mum.

And I just add, and I add and I add to this woman. It's almost like she's like, the goddess in my life, honestly.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Went to hell and back just to heal my wounds / 'Cause it gets like that, wrong side of the moon / No Tutankhamun, you're my Cleopatra / No side ting, don't need a backup / Need a real one, don't need an actor / Her last one's fake, think he won a BAFTA")*

Yo, just hearing those, like, with all them vocals like that is crazy to me right now. I remember writing that whole verse on paper.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "I mixed a lot of love with a lot of drugs, then I found you / She liked petty crimes, she had green eyes like Mountain Dew")*

Those two lines there (sings): "She liked petty crimes, she had green eyes like Mountain Dew."

I hated them at first. I actually thought it was a bit of a lazy line and a bit of a flimsy line. I just thought, was it a bit cheesy? And I just was like, I'm not even from America. So I was just like, we don't even drink Mountain Dew in England like that.

But, there's something about "green eyes like Mountain Dew" that just connected with people. They're the lines that everyone remembers from this song.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Would you be my light, be my yellow? / P.Y.T walking down Portobello / Put a smile on his face at the end of the day / MDMA helped us fly away / Who'd've known, who'd've known")*

*you would save my life / Who'd've known, who'd've known you would fly my kite / Could you tell, could you tell? / Could you tell, tell, tell")*

So I had the two verses and I had my chorus. Me and Beach Noise felt great about it. I was so happy about it that I called my friend Aidan Cullen, who's a director. And I said, this is the single. I wanna film a video, now. Tonight.

He's an amazing guy. He backs it straight away. Let's do it. I'm like, I just wanna go to the beach.

And we just banged out the video. The video cost me like \$80. I just paid for Aidan's petrol.

And now I'm just like, I'm super excited, I'm super gassed, I'm moving quickly. One of my friends, his name's Daniel Chetrit, he has a show with Kendall Jenner called Zaza Radio on Apple Music.

He's like, yo, we're doing the show up at Kendall's tomorrow. You should come and play the song on the show. 'Cause I'm telling everyone that this song is coming out in a couple weeks.

By the way, it's not done, and it's not mixed. It's just the bare bones of the song.

I go to Kendall's house. And one of the songs I play is "Hell N Back," and she loves it.

That goes out, right, the next day. And now, I've put it up on my Instagram. I've tweeted about it. So now "Hell N Back"'s in the world.

This is where it's gonna take a turn.

I get back home, only to find out a couple weeks later that the song is a sample.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - loop)*

This whole time, Beach Noise have not told me that that loop is a sample.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - loop)*

*("Caught You In a Lie" by ROBERT PARKER)*

*(Vocals: "You said he was your cousin")*

"Caught You In a Lie," by Robert Parker.

*("Caught You In a Lie" by ROBERT PARKER)*

*(Vocals: "I found out that he wasn't")*

I've never put a song out, before or after then, that has a sample in.

And I can't get this sample cleared. We can't get hold of the people that own the rights to this song, to Robert Parker's version.

We're going through agents every way, you know, like label are doing it, management are doing it. We've even got external agencies working on it. No one can find it.

June happens.

July happens.

We're now at the start of August. I'm losing my mind at this point.

I'm feeling like I'm embarrassing myself a little bit. Because I've already played this song. People already know what it is. They're expecting it.

But then, they found out like, who owned it, you know. It was his daughter. Her name was Maple.

And my manager says to me, you know what? Like, you should write her a letter.

So I write Maple this, like blind letter. I kid you not: Within a few days, we found her son. And he was super helpful.

And what we come to find out is that they're from New Orleans, and they lost a bunch of the paperwork in Hurricane Katrina.

Like, long story short, like, he ends up helping us clear it, we get it cleared.

But what it taught me about sampling was, wow, like, I had this attachment towards Maple and her son and in turn her dad. And I really

felt like I had a connection with them at that point. Like, I felt like we'd gone through this process.

There's really like a thread that is magic.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - loop with whistle)*

But essentially it's like, knowing that it was a sample made it quite 2D to me.

The feeling is already in there, but we want to add ourselves onto it too.

And the loop remains throughout the whole thing. So it does stay quite linear.

And so, it needed sections.

And then, in that moment, Beach Noise, they send me another version with this whistle on it.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - whistle + beat)*

Andrew Boyd, one of their mates, had come in, and came up with that whistle line.

I'm just like, oh my God, this is magic.

So after the whistle, I still feel like it wasn't done. I always thought it had this Amy Winehouse feeling about it. I just heard horns. And so I hit up a friend called Isaiah who plays in a band called Onyx Collective, in New York.

And so, I told him the idea, he went and done it, and wrote a line.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - horns)*

I gotta give so much props to Isaiah, man. Because for him to just interpret it how he interpreted it, and get on the same wavelength as us, and add his thing to it.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - horns)*



I just can't believe that he was able to do that, and it be as special as it was.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR - horns with other layers)*

*(Vocals: "Just like a dream")*

I added those at Shangri-La,

*("Just like it seems")*

Those I did because I felt like, they felt like a sample. So that's why we took the low end outta my voice, because we wanted it to feel like an old radio.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Just like a dream, it seems to me")*

This was also like a gateway into me, like, exploring harmonies.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

*(Vocals: "Could you tell where my head was at (when you found me)? / Me and you went to hell and back (just to find peace)")*

So, the three members of Beach Noise: Jake, AKA Jake the snake; it's Matt; and it's Johnny.

Those three guys are, are amazing, and the way Matt had gone about like treating my vocals... People had heard my voice, but they'd never heard it like *that*.

'Cause I remember coming home and playing the song to my friends, and one of the first things they said to me was, you sound like a pop star on this. Like, you've been recorded really well, and this is how you could continue to sound.

*(Vocals: "Yea-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah" / "Just like a dream" / "Yea-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah-eah")*

*Will You Be My Yellow?* comes out late September, right? For me, "Hell N Back" is a smash. It's streaming more than any of my other songs; it's doing really well; in my head, it's a smash.

By the end of 2020 to 2021, it's like picking up on US radio. And it became a bit of a COVID song.

It goes to number one Triple A, in America. Billboard Triple A. And it comes to summer and the song's just still going.

Now TikTok have caught hold of it and now it's like going bananas on that app.

And then I'm like, okay, I wanna work on a new record. And that new record is not in the direction of "Hell N Back." And "Hell N Back," the sound of "Hell N Back," was never really the direction I was ever gonna go in anyway, to be honest. Not that I'm restricted to one sound, but I just knew that it weren't gonna be that. And I really did not wanna become "Mister "Hell N Back."

I start, like, shunning the song, man. Like, I'm getting TV offers to go on TV and play it. And I'm like, turning them all down. It saddens me to say, but like, I kind of become anti "Hell N Back."

And then, I think at some point in 2022, I kinda had this realization of that like, man, like... My friend passing, and all of the DNA that had gone into this song and all of the like, stuff like, how could I not love it?

I had this moment where, I kind of did it in my head, but I, I wrote a letter to "Hell N Back," as if it was a friend of mine. Basically just saying, I love you, and I'm sorry for treating you like that.

And I just wanted to apologize to the song and I had to get that outta my system in order to acknowledge the song and then move forward with it as this like, proud thing.

I think I needed this, man. I think I needed to talk about, I never really, like have spoken extensively about this song.

And ultimately I think it's the best song I ever wrote, so... I'm just so proud of what the song's become, man. Yeah.

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 "Hell N Back," by Bakar, in its entirety.

*("Hell N Back" by BAKAR)*

Visit [songexploder.net/bakar](http://songexploder.net/bakar) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Hell N Back," and you can watch the music video that Bakar made with his friend on the beach for \$80.

If you liked this episode, and you want to check out another, maybe try the Imagine Dragons episode, for the story of another song that was recorded at Rick Rubin's famous Shangri-La studio. You can find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net), or wherever you listen.

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

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.