

Song Exploder
Danny Brown - Y.B.P. (feat. Bruiser Wolf)
Episode 269

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.

("Y.B.P." (feat. Bruiser Wolf) by DANNY BROWN)

Danny Brown started his career in 2007 by handing out mixtapes in Detroit, where he's from. In 2011, he put out his acclaimed second album, *XXX*. Since then, he's collaborated with rappers like Kendrick Lamar, ASAP Rocky and JPEGMafia, but he's also worked with electronic bands like Purity Ring and The Avalanches, and he did a verse on a remix for Korn.

When I first heard him, around when *XXX* came out, I was really drawn to his voice. And I also appreciated that, given how young so many artists are now when they get really famous, Danny Brown's career really started taking off in his 30s. He put out his sixth album, *Quaranta*, in 2023. And for this episode, I talked to him about one of the songs from that album, called "Y.B.P.," which features guest vocals from Bruiser Wolf.

("Y.B.P." (feat. Bruiser Wolf) by DANNY BROWN)

*(Vocals: "We was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit (Raised in Detroit) / You could never learn what a n**** been taught / Say, we was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit (Young, black and poor) / You could never learn what a n**** been taught")*

Danny: My name's Danny Brown.

(music fades out)

When I created this song, I was in Detroit. I was really in a dark time in my life.

I had just went through a real bad breakup. I was living in a house in the suburbs and so I decided to move downtown. 'Cause it was lively down there. You know, it was just a lot of new restaurants, new nightclubs. So I would move down there with the intentions on partying and being single, you know?

And then the quarantine and pandemic and everything happened. So everything was just shut down. So now I'm in this penthouse apartment by myself and just lonely. And I was just drinking a lot, and I figured the best way for me to get myself outta this funk was just to work it out, start back creating music again.

So when I started on this album, it was just, really just getting my feelings out.

(Drum beat)

So my friend Skywlkr, you know, I just told him to gimme some beats, you know, just seeing what he got. And then he gave me the beat for this song.

(Drum beat)

I really love a good chop. Like, if somebody can chop up a good sample, it's like, oh man. And it gave me, like, a happy feeling.

I kind of like to make music with my heart and not my brain, and not really think too much about it, and just do what it make me feel.

And with this song, the feeling was like, I was back in Detroit, and I always want to tell those stories of where I came from.

I really like to wake up first thing in the morning, 'cause I was like, smoking a lot of weed then, and drinking a lot. So, you know, waking up fresh, just get a cup of coffee, cut on some beats and see what happened. And I just wrote like one verse to it.

(Vocals: "When we changed the channel with the pliers / Wet clothes on the porch, we ain't have a dryer / Spending food stamps, wait 'til ya leave the store / Too many in the bed, had to sleep on the floor")

[Laughs] "When we changed the channel with the pliers." Back in those days, we always had, like, the good TV downstairs. And then the TV in my bedroom would always be some old, raggedy television, it had like knobs. And after you use the knob for so long, sometime it'd break off. So then you got to turn the actual knob with the pliers. You know, the pliers would be always right by the TV.

And the good thing about living in Detroit was that, um, we's so close to Canada, we would all get the Canadian stations. And I'd be always up at night. I would watch a lot of Mr. Bean. Mr. Bean and, like, Kids in the Hall.

If you lose the pliers, you're stuck on that channel. You just gotta watch hockey now. You like oh, man, we watching hockey tonight, I guess.

My favorite line in that song, I—I was writing it in a penthouse apartment, but I had a line where I say:

(Vocals: "Spending food stamps / Wait 'til ya leave the store")

My mom would like, give us food stamps or something. And then we'd, like, go to school, and all the kids would be in there, like, spending real money. And if they see you spending food stamps, they'll like joke on you in school and stuff. So I would always have to like wait around in the store and wait till everybody else bought their stuff and leave out the store. Then sneak and spend.

So I was like, I was spending food stamps, but I'll wait till you leave the store.

(Beat ends)

I didn't even know we was poor! I would say my parents did a great job of taking care of me, but, 'cause also, growing up in Detroit, it's always somebody doing worse than you.

So we was poor, but I didn't ever feel that way, because I always knew it was kids in my neighborhood that was doing worse. It would be like, kids knocking on your door asking for sugar, or do you got some bread so we can make some sandwiches? I was never one of those kids, you know. My mom always made sure we ate good every night. But she had four kids, and my parents had me real young. My dad was 16, my mom was 18. And I look at my dad all the time like, you crazy, man. You were 21 years old with four kids. Like, what was your life, man?

You know, I definitely wasn't mature enough and I'm pretty sure he wasn't. So that's why I say, "Kids raising kids, and we all trying to be grown."

*(Vocals: "Kids raisin' kids, all tryna be grown / Things never fixed when we come from broken homes / We was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit / You could never learn what a n**** been taught / Say, we was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit / You could never learn what a n**** been taught")*

I'm not that good at hooks. I'm cool enough to admit that, that the hooks are like my weakest in my writing game. But working with JPEG Mafia on the, um, last album, he kind of taught me a way to get around that.

And he's just like, just write the longest verses possible. And eventually a hook will present itself in that long verse, and then you can edit the rest of the stuff around, and make a verse outta all that stuff.

*(Vocals: "We was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit / You could never learn what a n**** been taught / Say, we was young, black and poor being raised in Detroit / You could never learn what a n**** been taught")*

Which, pretty much is just saying like, all the stuff that I've been through is what made me who I am today. And everything that I learned, you can't teach that. You just have to experience it.

When I create these songs with just, like, simple loops like that, it's almost just, like, me with like, an acoustic guitar. Then once I get 'em to like a executive producer or something like that, they bring the full band in and bring everything into it.

Hrishikesh: There's like a moment in the, let me play this... Okay so like, the drums change

here...

(80s-style drum beat)

And it gets real eighties.

Danny: Yeah.

(80s-style drum beat ends)

That was really Kassa Overall, who's, um, my label mate, who I really consider to be like the MVP of this album. Because he took a lot of my ideas, and took 'em to places that I couldn't have did on my own, you know?

And I'm glad he was able to pull that out of it. Like, we were talking about my childhood and stuff and he was able to like, just tap into that, and it gave it that feeling, man, and it's so dope.

(Vocals: "Detroit City, that's where I live / Feels like poetic justice / you get killed at the drive-in / Who gon' front you some work? Who gon' front you some work? / We be fresh from the dirt, put you on a t-shirt")

The newest guy in our crew is Bruiser Wolf. When I first heard him rap, it was just like, a breath of fresh air for me, you know?

I wanted to get him on this song. And he actually, like, the next day, wrote a verse.

It was a dope verse, but you know, I think he was just trying to be cool and just say some dope stuff. And I was like, nah man, I want you to tap in more, man. Like, you gotta reach into your soul, man. Like, just talk to the city. Like, let 'em know where we come from.

Hrishikesh: What was his reaction to that, when you gave him that direction?

Danny: I don't think he was too happy, to be honest, 'cause I know he worked on that verse. And he just knew it was dope—it was dope, but it just didn't work for this song.

But when he did redo it, and when we played it back, and he was like, *Man, you was right.*

And then he just had so many Detroit references in that verse, like, a lot of people in the outside world probably wouldn't get half the stuff he's saying. Like, naming like a lot of our sports heroes that we grew up watching: Rodney Peete who played for the Lions, and Barry Sanders, you know?

(Vocals: "Wanna run like Barry, shoot like Zeke / But in the hood with a nine on me like Rodney")

Peete / Motor city, the Motown, the Fab Five / Police violence, that's how Malice Green died")

Talking about Malice Green, which was a guy that got beat by the police, and they murdered him. That happened, like, back in the day. And that was like a big deal in Detroit.

And one of my favorite lines on this album is from him on that song, which was "Ask 'em why, BI, like Butch Jones."

(Vocals: "They wanna be us when they grown / But ask them why, be I, like Butch Jones")

And Butch Jones was a leader of a gang in the eighties of Detroit called YBI, which stands for Young Boys Incorporated.

And he was like the leader of all these young kids, you know, that was doing wrong. But in that line, he said "They want to be us when they grown, but ask them Y, BI." And it's like that double entendre, YBI, like why, why would you want to be me, if I ain't doing nothing right for the community?

I felt like his other verse where he was trying to relate more to the people in the outside world, this time he just talked to the people in the city.

(Vocals: "My city show no love / It's hard to fit in the murder mitten like OJ glove / Yeah")

This album sat around for some years. And then when we were gearing up, starting to, like, getting the final product, my manager Dart, he had hit me up. And he was like, man, I booked you some studio time, man. I think you need to put one more verse on it. Just tie it all up.

I was like, man, I don't feel like, even.... because—what made it so hard—I was just struggling with addiction at that time. And I was just looking at my career. It was almost to the point I was like, I don't even want to do this no more. I was just like *I hate this*.

But he made me do it. So I went and recorded in Austin. I just ended up getting super drunk. Went to the studio. Wasn't a good day, to be honest. It really wasn't a good day.

But I sent him the song and he was like, yeah, that was just what I needed. So [chuckles] I was like, I did my job, you know?

(Vocals: "Stuck in the middle between Blade and Dilla / Surrounded by killers, couldn't see the big picture / From a bird's eye view, we ain't had no clue / Didn't know what was true, had nothing to lose")

You know, I say, "Stuck in the middle between Blade and Dilla." Blade Icewood was like a street rapper in Detroit. And of course everybody know J Dilla. And I always felt like I was just in the middle of that. Like, I wasn't always like the more

traditional hip hop style, and then the street rappers who, you know, pretty much is drug dealers that rap in they free time, you know.

I always felt like I was in the middle of those 'cause I wasn't necessarily accepted by either crowd, but I was able to play in both arenas. I just feel like a nomad in some sense, you know?

Coming up early days, you know, I was pretty much just like everybody else that starts out. I didn't have a voice yet. I would go to New York all the time and, you know, I was trying to get a record deal and stuff. So they would try to, like, make me like rap over like Nelly beats or stuff like that. And of course I was doing it because I wanted to get a record deal. But, at the end of the day, that wasn't me. So I was like, I need to go back home and make a name for myself first.

And then when I went back, I started to rap over that more Dilla-esque stuff, 'cause then I looked at it like, that's our sound. I'm from Detroit. That's what I need to be doing. I need to be making that kind of music. And so, I didn't find this Danny Brown voice until 30, to be honest.

(Vocals: "Back to the world, we ain't had no plan / Everything about the city made me who I am / You can make it here, yeah, yeah, you know the rest / Everyday was like a test, if you fail, it's death")

But I feel like I just got caught up in what a lot of artists probably get caught up in, you know, we create these personas for ourselves. And you know, with rap it's almost like creating this character that's bigger than life.

You know, you always gonna over-glorify your lifestyle or, you know, try to make yourself like this big superhero kind of character. And in the midst of that, I stopped being Daniel and started being Danny Brown. And Danny Brown wasn't happy. It wasn't a healthy lifestyle that anyone should be living.

But thank God, you know, I was able to get some help and you know, go into rehab and stuff. And you realize that you deal with a lot of underlying trauma. You realize why you do it in the first place. It starts out fun and, you know, hanging with your friends and just having a good time, but it still stems from something else deeper and darker that you're trying to escape from, you know?

(Vocals: "How the system made division but it don't add up? / Take away from the hood, never giving back to us / How the system made division but it don't add up? / Take away from the hood, never giving back to us")

I have a sense of who this song is for, and that's for like, any kid right now that's going through that same thing. And then they can listen to something like this, and be like, look, he been through this, look where he at today. And for my childhood self, too. And just for me to just kind of remind myself to where I came from and where I'm at right now in my life. Like, man, you blessed. You did it. The

thing that you wanted to do as a childhood kid, when you would tell your teachers like, I wanna be a rapper. And the whole class would laugh at you, you know? But you did it. Like, you should be proud of yourself. I never was able to pat myself on the back and be like, be happy for what you became, you know?

(Vocals: "We was young, black and poor / You could never learn / Say, we was young, black and poor")

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

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And now, here's "Y.B.P." featuring Bruiser Wolf, by Danny Brown, in its entirety.

("Y.B.P." (feat. Bruiser Wolf) by DANNY BROWN)

For more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Y.B.P.," and you can watch the music video.

If you liked this episode, you might also like the episode with Meek Mill, from 2019. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the show, at songexploder.net.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Special thanks to Chris Goodwin. 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.