

**Song Exploder**  
**Little Simz - Free**  
**Episode 294**

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.

Little Simz is a rapper from England who put out her first album in 2015. She's won the Mercury Prize, a Brit Award, and three MOBO awards. She also starred in the Netflix series Top Boy. Her most recent album is called Lotus, and came out in June 2025, and it followed a pretty tumultuous time in her career. For this episode, I got to talk to Little Simz about one of the songs from that album called "Free," along with Miles Clinton James, who produced the track.

*("Free" by LITTLE SIMZ)*

*(Vocals: "Wishing that the love will set us free / Said that we would never ever / Crash, fold under pressure / Love getter, use it to do better")*

Little Simz: My name is Simbi.

Hrishikesh: Where does the story of this song start for you?

Little Simz: This song kind of happened in two parts. It was the year 2022, like springtime. I was reading this book called Conversations with God, and it talks a lot about love and fear and the duality of those two things.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hm.

Little Simz: I had this feeling like, why is it fear and not hate? But that book definitely unlocked that for me. And I was just in a deep state of, like, documenting my thoughts and feelings on paper.

So I kind of wanted to write, like, my take. So I wrote the words as, like, a poem.

Hrishikesh: Would you read the poem?

Little Simz: Yeah.

*"I think love is understanding that people can change  
And loving them anyway, through every stage  
I read All About Love, then I gave it to Jade*

*I think love is sharing knowledge, there's so much to gain  
I think love is every time I put pen to the page  
If I don't love what I'm doing, then I'm hardly engaged  
God, you love me though I'm flawed  
I know I'm not an innocent child, but I'm yours  
And if you are with me, you are safe  
I know my body isn't immortal, but I am brave  
I think you know it's real love when it's sincere  
I'mma show 'em I ain't scared, eradicate fear"*

I'm not the best like, poetry deliverer, I don't think.

HH: No, that sounded great.

Little Simz: No, some people that are so aware of like the space and the cadence and stuff, but I think mine just ends up sounding like a rap,

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Little Simz: Or like I'm just, yeah.

Hrishikesh: When you were writing that, who do you think you were writing it for?

Little Simz: Me.

Hrishikesh: Like, what are the parts of that that you felt like you most needed to hear?

Little Simz: "I think that love is forgiving yourself." That just, that line, yeah, really hits me.

Because I just think, you know, we make mistakes and carry a lot of, like, shame and a lot of blame sometimes. And it weighs us down. Well, it's definitely weighed me down. And I think I've just had to forgive myself, do you know what I mean?

I came into this industry, like, very trusting.

Hrishikesh: How old were you?

Little Simz: I started performing when I was like nine.

But when I started putting out music, I was probably like 14, 15.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

LITTLE SIMZ: There's a lot I probably would've done different. But then even when I say that, I'm like, would I, though? Because I guess it has made me who I am.

So I think it's just embracing all that comes with who you are, and like, the same way you can learn to accept people, I think you learn how to accept your shortcomings and just try and be better, and just forgive yourself.

Hrishikesh: So you said that the song happened in two parts; what was the second part?

Little Simz: I wrote the poem, and then got in with Miles, who produced the song.

MILES: So, I'm Miles Clinton James and I'm a record producer from uh, North London.

Hrishikesh: How did you and Simz first meet?

MILES: Oh goodness. I mean, that was a, a very long time ago. I was a session musician. And the first session was maybe 2014? I can vaguely remember playing some bass in a studio somewhere in East London.

And yeah, I just remember thinking she was really focused. She had her, her headphones on and, you know, was writing on a notepad. That's my earliest memory. (chuckles) So we probably didn't speak a huge amount then.

Hrishikesh: How did it go from that situation, where you're not speaking to each other, and you're there as a session player, to becoming the producer of this track?

MILES: Mm-hmm. You know, post that session, I uh, was called in quite a bit to work with Simz. And I would be playing, you know, whatever it was needed at the time. So it could have been guitar, bass, percussion.

And on the previous album, I was involved quite heavily on the, the writing side of things. So I was in, you know, with the full band and, and orchestra and, you know, coming up with ideas in the moment. Um, so yeah, that was maybe the session that consolidated our relationship.

We definitely spent a lot of time just connecting, yeah. Emotionally, absolutely.

And then, June last year, we had a proper catch up over the phone. We spoke about kind of where she'd been, where she was currently, you know, she was in quite a, a difficult space, I would say.

She called me up and I could tell, there was a, an emptiness or hollowness in her voice. The call really took me off guard, to be honest. I was in another session and I could feel how charged, how tense she was feeling, you know, even just

over the phone.

Little Simz: I'd just got out of a situation that kind of just rattled my whole shit, to be honest. Someone that I was creatively intertwined with and worked on a lot of music with.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Little Simz: And I think when you create with people for a long time, you almost start to feel, and almost get made to feel, like, without this setup, you can't do what you do.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Little Simz: And yeah, it just really rocked me a lot.

I can kick myself and beat myself up and like, ah, you idiot, like, you should have known and you should have dah, dah, dah, dah...

My response to that was like, I'm not confident in myself, and I'm not gonna come to the studio and make everyone believe that I am. I'm not a pretender, and that's not how I feel.

MILES: And that kind of, yeah, that stopped me in my tracks.

Little Simz: But what I can try and do is use it. And I can talk about the fact that I don't feel confident in myself, in a song like "Free."

Hrishikesh: And what made you want to reach out to Miles, specifically?

Little Simz: He just wasn't afraid. I knew he was just gonna be super down to like, try whatever. And that excited me, because I didn't know what kind of album we were gonna make.

But I wanted to feel free, and just like a kid that is just, this is just play.

Hrishikesh: There are so many different kinds of producers out there who work in so many different ways. I was wondering, for you – what do you want from your producer?

Little Simz: I think the role of the producer is to essentially understand what the artist wants to say, and allows them the room to be able to express that and then compose this soundtrack to that story.

*(drums)*

MILES: Most of the other tracks in the album were created from scratch, together with

Simz, um, whereas “Free” is an exception to that. “Free” came out of an evening hangout with my closest friend, um, who’s also a co-writer on this song, a guy called Alex Bonfanti. He and myself, we’ve been friends for the longest time, but as he’s toured more, and I’ve got children, we don’t find much time to connect. So I’d hold these evening kind of catch-ups, you know, with no real pressure on what would come out of it, just really for us to catch up.

I jumped on drums.

And Al is an incredible bass player. He’s the guy who’s actually playing bass on the song.

*(add bass)*

Hrishikesh: First of all, (laughs) there’s something that you can only hear when you have the,

MILES: That’s right. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: The stems isolated, which is this little moment.

*(isolated drum stem, voice saying “Hmm”)*

Hrishikesh and Miles: (laugh)

Hrishikesh: “Hmm.”

MILES: I think that might actually be Al saying “Hmm.”

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

MILES: (laughs) You know, he was, he was locking, he was locking in, and he was pretty happy with probably the groove I was playing.

Hrishikesh: Amazing.

MILES: I love stuff like that. There’s so much hidden stuff in stems that no one would ever know about. But leave it in. It’s part of the vibe. (laughs)

*(bassline)*

Hrishikesh: Where were you recording this?

MILES: So I’m based out of a studio in North London, which has already been around, um, since the seventies. It belongs to a band called the Kinks.

Hrishikesh: Oh, wow.

MILES: And I have a room right at the top of the building. So I've, over the years, collected a number of tape machines. And, and "Free," in fact, was one of those songs that was recorded directly to two-inch tape, in one pass.

*(add drums to bassline)*

Which, you know, in this day and age is quite special, I'd say. Not many people try and record directly to tape, you know, with no ability to erase or edit or at least a, you know, limited ability to do it.

HH: The bassline on this is, I mean, it's like the opposite of a loop. Even as the chord progression cycles back around, the bass part's always doing something different.

MILES: You know, we actually jammed the song from beginning to end. So there was all this great movement that was happening naturally in his playing. And, you know, sometimes unfortunately, people can go in and tidy stuff up and, yeah, simplify a lot of stuff.

But in this case, I just felt like actually this is what it was supposed to be. You know, this interaction is human and shouldn't be tidied up too much.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

MILES: So there's all this natural variation, you're right.

*(drums drop out, continue bassline)*

Little Simz: These little things are just, I think, what makes it special. But yeah. Alex is wicked, man. He's great.

MILES: We started off with the drum and bass groove, you know, and then I eventually came back in and said, hold on, it'd be nice to put some nylon guitar and some percussion down on top.

*(add guitar)*

And that's my humble \$70 nylon guitar from back in the day. It feels really dry and basic. But definitely I love having it around.

*(percussion - congas & tambourine)*

And that's myself on congas and my friend Alex playing tambourine. And what we would do when we have these jams is, we'd lay the drums, bass and guitar down, and 'cause I, my room's full of you know, African drums and weird bits of percussion.

So we'd do one pass, just for fun, of percussion together, to give it some life.

*(Vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

So there you're hearing myself and Alex with a microphone, you know, six feet in front of us. And we are singing, but not at that original pitch. In fact, what we're doing is, we're singing at a lower pitch, and I've sped that up.

Hrishikesh: No kidding!

MILES: Yeah. So the original vocals were done by myself and Al, at a lower pitch.

So we'd recorded the original instrumental, and we wanted to get into that space of early kind of Jackson Five, kind of early seventies soul, and, you know, a lot of those singers had almost, you know, squeaky, high-pitched vocals.

So one creative way to do that was actually to slow the tape down.

*(instrumental slowing down)*

And sing at a lower pitch.

*(Slowed vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

Hrishikesh: So that's what your voices actually sound like.

MILES: (laughs) There you go, exactly, yeah.

*(Slowed vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

So we're using some pretty old school, period-correct stuff.

Hrishikesh: Just tape-machine technology.

MILES: Absolutely. We didn't have any computers involved at this early stage. Part of the catch up is just recording to tape, no screens, and just playing, you know.

And then when you go and play the combined vocals and rhythm section back

together, your voice is actually formanted up, so you sound higher.

*(Final vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

Hrishikesh: Where did those words come from?

MILES: I know me and Alex, for quite a while, had been going to a lot of marches in Central London. We were feeling injustice in the world was kind of weighing heavy on our hearts. And, you know, more love was more needed. (chuckles) So that was something that just felt right. It matched our energy.

*(Vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

But even after we'd finished the song, we didn't really know what, you know, would come of it.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Little Simz and Miles James continues after this.

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Hrishikesh: How did you first hear the track that Miles and Alex made?

Little Simz: I think Miles just played it.

*(Vocals: "Ahhhh / Wishing that the love would set us free")*

And I was like, yo, what is that? And then I just had it on loop. Like I was just listening to it, listening to it.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Little Simz: And, I don't know, I felt really emotional, but I also felt really uplifted. It felt positive and bright. And I'd needed that. And so I just got him to just keep playing it. And then I land on the poem.

*(Vocals: "I think that love is forgiving yourself / I think that love is offering your immediate help / I think that love is everything that we need in this world / I think the key is being honest and being yourself / I think love is understanding that people can change / And loving them anyway through every stage / I read All About Love then I gave it to Jade / Love is sharing knowledge, there's so much to gain")*

Hrishikesh: How long had it been, at that point, since you'd written the poem originally?



Little Simz: Two years.

Hrishikesh: So, what made you want to reach back to that poem for this song, in that moment?

Little Simz: I think it was just the hook: "Wishing that the love will set us free."

It just felt super fitting to talk about love, what that meant to me, and then talk about fear.

("I think that fear is not trusting yourself / I think that fear is keeping true information withheld / I think fear can be exposed in abundance of wealth / And then creeps in when you're not loving yourself / Fear can be dressed in the form of protection / Fear can be the culprit of slowing progression")

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me what you were thinking about, in terms of your flow and delivery in the verses?

Little Simz: Mmm... I just wanted it to feel conversational. Like I could just say this to you. And also, I think I love that style of, like, rap, where it's in the pocket.

*(drums + bassline)*

And the music is just supporting what I'm saying,

*(Vocals: "Love is somethin' that you can't measure / No judgment, no pressure (Ah) / It's your letter, your words for whomever / (Wishing that the love will set us free) / Said that we would never ever / Crash, fold under pressure / Love getter, use it to do better")*

Hrishikesh: Why did you want it to feel conversational?

Little Simz: Because I think this is a conversation. Like, let's talk about it. Like, if we were going around in a circle and everyone had to say what they thought love and fear was about, this is what I would say. And I can pass the mic, and let's have a discussion, do you know?

Like, I don't know anything.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Little Simz: And that's why I say "I think" in the lyrics. I think that love is forgiving yourself... It might not be! (laughs) Like, I don't know. From what I think and what I feel, that's what I think it is. And it's like, once upon a time, I probably thought love was pain.

If you don't feel pain, then that's not love, then, is it?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Little Simz: And so I think, yeah, it changes. And I'm just getting more understanding of what I think it means to me.

I just wanted it to feel like this is a wider conversation.

*(Vocals: "I think we fear all the answers, so we don't ask the questions, yeah / I think that shit is a lethal weapon / I think we fear being naked from the fear of rejection / If beauty is in the eye of the beholder / Then why are we obsessed with seeking perfection?" )*

And then we get to the end part.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, after those first two verses, the song kind of shifts.

Little Simz: It was an accident, that last verse.

MILES: I'd had a section looping – I was probably working on editing for something in Pro Tools, and I had this loop going.

Little Simz: It was just looping "Free, 2, 3, 4, Free, 2, 3..."

*(Vocal loop: "Free / Free / Free / Free / Free / Free / Free..." )*

MILES: Yeah, Simz just, you know, when she heard that, you know, she just got writing immediately.

*(Outro vocals: "Can't hold me down 'cause I've always been (free) / Why they always wanna hate when the love is (free) / Hear me now, mic check, it was one, two (free) / One MOBO weren't enough so I had to get (free)" )*

Little Simz: I was just like, just keep looping it, and I'll just keep going.

*(Cont. outro vocals: "MJ said he got the tunes I should pull up at (free) / Every time I bust a lyric, I be feeling so (free)" )*

That was a cool moment. Cuz it was so accidental. You couldn't write it. Yeah.

Hrishikesh: I love how, in this section, you change the word of the sample,

Little Simz: (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Like from “free” to “three,” depending on the context of what you’re saying.

Little Simz: Yeah, yeah.

Hrishikesh: Do you have a favorite line from that outro?

Little Simz: I like "Auntie Simbi, what she call me when my niece turned three".

Hrishikesh: That's my favorite, too.

Little Simz: Really?

Hrishikesh: 'Cause I have a niece that, that just, that's so sweet. It's like a little emotional dagger you just like, snuck in.

Little Simz: (laughs)

*(Outro vocals: “(free) / Auntie Simbi what she call me when my niece turned (free) / Used to bump the train to college I would travel for (free) / Never miss a countdown it was five, four (free) / Two, one, take off in the air, I'm (free)”)*

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about the strings that are also in this track? How did you end up deciding to add those?

MILES: I struggled with a feeling that the chorus, you know, the main "Wishing that the love would set us free," section didn't feel, for want of a better term, chorus-y enough.

And I always had in the back of my mind some of the initial references, you know, the Jackson Five stuff had audacious string lines.

So we teamed up with an amazing string arranger, Rosie Danvers. She came around to the studio one day and I sang some, some ideas, loose ideas, and she went away for 10 days or so and kind of arranged some of the ideas that I sang, you know. And then we were fortunate enough to get one string day across the whole record, you know, which includes maybe six or seven songs with strings on.

Little Simz: So we are in a studio called RAK in London. We have a power cut in the middle of the day. The whole studio. Blackout. Nothing's working. So I'm like, oh my... we literally had this one day.

MILES: And you can imagine how expensive a day with full string section, you know, in a great studio in London costs you, for the power to go down. So it became quite stressful very quickly.

We had candles lit. And we had to rewire pretty much the whole studio, to bring in external power on these, you know, it was really quite a stressful day.

Little Simz: The players rehearsed it in the dark, it was like we're flying through the songs or whatever. So we get to "Free."

And it might have been like the second to last song we had to do strings on.

But because it wasn't a priority, and we were running outta time, we're like, ah, can we just do the stuff that we need to get strings for?

But Rosie was just like, let's just do this. It'll take 20 minutes. Bang, bang, bang.

And as soon as the first, like, note comes in with the strings,

*(strings)*

I never forget, me and Miles just looked at each other like, yo....

*(more strings)*

Everything about the song made even more sense. It just felt so classic and it just worked. It was perfect.

MILES: And it did just add, you know, when I was saying I was looking for something to give that chorus that feeling of it landing and feeling special, the strings really do that.

*(Vocals with strings: "Wishing that the love will set us free / (Ah) / Wishing that the love will set us free / (Ah)")*

Hrishikesh: You know, if you told someone that "Free" is a song about love, their first assumption might be that it's a song about, like, a romantic relationship.

Little Simz: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Which it's not.

Little Simz: Yeah, nah. It's far from.

I've definitely deeped to, like, there's more to this thing than people are telling me. And yeah, from my own experience, have just come to my own thoughts and feelings about it. And it might change, you know what I mean? I think, maybe in

10 years I might say actually love isn't, it's more about forgiving people, just in general, not so much about self, self, self.

That might be an idea—

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Little Simz: —you know, of what I think love is. So it's just like, at the time, what I was feeling like I needed to hear. As reminders to myself, you know? And what I've learned over the years.

But that's what I was saying earlier, like I don't really know anything. So I think I'm down to chat. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Free" by Little Simz, in its entirety.

*("Free" by LITTLE SIMZ)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net), where you'll find links to buy or stream "Free."

This episode was produced by me, Mary Dolan, Craig Eley, and Kathleen Smith, with production assistance from Tiger Biskup. 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.