

Song Exploder
Anohni - 4 Degrees
Episode 293

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.

Anohni is a singer and songwriter originally from England, who started putting out music in 2000. She's released 6 albums, and won the Mercury Prize. She's also been nominated for two Brit Awards and an Oscar. For this episode, I talked to her about the song "4 Degrees," from her 2016 album, Hopelessness. It might be strange to describe a song about climate change as an anthem, but that's what I think it is, and it feels more urgent with every passing year. It's also one of my most listened-to songs.

It was produced by two of my favorite electronic musicians: Daniel Lopatin, aka Oneohtrix Point Never, and Ross Birchard, aka Hudson Mohawke. I got to speak to Ross about how he started the track on his own, before it became a collaboration between the three of them. This is an episode I've been trying to make happen since 2016. Here it is.

("4 Degrees" by ANOHNi)

(Vocals: "I wanna hear the dogs crying for water / I wanna see the fish go belly-up in the sea / And all those lemurs and all those tiny creatures / I wanna see them burn, it's only 4 degrees")

Anohni: My name is Anohni.

I'd started working on an album with Dan Lopatin on demos, electronic demos, for a whole array of songs. The record I'd been making with Dan was going to be this kind of spectral, electro record. But things weren't quite coming into focus.

Ross: Hi, I am Ross, Hudson Mohawke.

Hrishikesh: How did you first hear Anohni's music and get connected with her?

Ross: It goes back to an after party that I was at in Glasgow, just around the time I had started releasing music. So this would be mid-2000s.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Ross: Someone played me this song called "Hope There's Someone."

("Hope There's Someone" by ANOHNi)

(Vocals: "Hope there's someone who'll take care of me / When I die, will I go?")

Ross: You know, it was after a night of partying and I was like, "Oh my god."

(Vocals: "Hope there's someone who'll set my heart free / Nice to hold when I'm tired")

Floods of tears. And I was like, "What on earth is that voice? What is this?"

I'm always doing these notebooks full of like, dream collabs. So it'd been something that I had been thinking about for years.

Anohni: And I actually wrote him an email.

Hrishikesh: Ross found the original email, where you said "Would you like to ever collaborate?" And he wrote back and said, "I'm actually finishing up a record. And you are somebody I would love to collaborate with, but I never reached out because I just figured it would never happen."

Anohni: Which is so weird, considering he was doing records with like Kanye West at the time, but okay.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) Yeah.

Anohni: But I remember that whole interaction. He is very humble. But he immediately asked me to sing on a song with him for his record. And we did it. It was a song that we called "Indian Steps."

And then I said, you know, do you have anything else?

And he said, "Oh, actually, a lot of this stuff is just, like, rejects. Like, a lot of the bigwigs have all, like, made their way through this old soup, and they didn't take it." I said, "Well, I'll take the leftovers."

Ross: In my head, they were like rap instrumentals, 'cause that was a lot of what I was doing at that point. But they were very melodic. And one of the first instrumentals became "4 Degrees."

(synth bassline)

I actually made it in Hawaii. And it was during sessions for Kanye stuff. We had this little funny studio that's over there that, it's in sort of a strip mall. But when you enter the actual studio, it's like, oh, you're looking out onto the ocean. And you know, it's like volcanoes around and this kind of thing. And so I had a

tendency to lean into these sort of like anthemic chord progressions.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember what the first sound was that you created for it?

Ross: I think it was the drums.

(drums)

I wanted something that is almost orchestral, but it has the punch of an electronic thing.

Hrishikesh: Almost like it's a, like a timpani.

Ross: Yeah.

Anohni: To make the drums so hard-hitting, and the reason things felt so ballistic, is because that, in the way that people used to double vocal tracks, he would double drum tracks.

Ross: And I was also really obsessed with the horn section in general.

(horn melody)

The important thing for me was it had to almost have, like, a fanfare quality to it.

(horn chord progressions)

And so I was like programming these chord progressions, where some of the notes are so close together that the way they interact with each other brings another layer of emotion into it.

Hrishikesh: Sometimes people program synth versions of orchestral instruments as like a placeholder. Was that what you felt like you were doing? Or did you specifically prefer the sound of these horns over something actually orchestral?

Ross: I was kind of obsessed at that point with making things that were programmed, but that you couldn't always tell were. I liked that uncanny valley.

(horn chords + drums)

Is there like 10 guys banging on drums there? Or a hundred people playing here and this is some huge thing? I liked that confusion.

Hrishikesh: And then, what's this sound?

(Synplant synth)

Ross: Yeah. That's a great, great little synth called Synplant.

The interface is like a combination of like a plant and a bunch of DNA strands. Basically like you can grow a sound out of one seed that you plant.

It's not that impressive to look at, but I always wanted to use synths and sounds that I knew I wasn't hearing in dance music.

(add synth bassline)

That feels unfamiliar to me, in a good way.

Hrishikesh: What did you think of Ross's instrumental, when you first heard it?

Anohni: I was very, very into it. Very, very compelled by it. And it was the kind of music I was listening to. The music I was doing, working with all these other orchestral arrangers, I was doing symphonic shows. I did the symphony show at Radio City, Teatro Royal in Madrid, at the Royal Opera House in London. I mean, the shows were really elevated and they were beautiful, but within two or three years, I felt like I'd sort of done it.

So, it was so refreshing to get into electronic beats in a way that I hadn't for a long time.

Everything came into focus, for the album and the project, when I heard Ross's demos. And they were so ballistic and so seductive. It took me out of the role of primary songwriter and put me more into the, the one who devised the message that would be embedded in the song. And everything that I'd been thinking about for the last several years just crawled out of the crevices of my mind.

It was like my whole last six years plus of obsession with what was going on, on the national and global scale, just, like, erupted into lyric.

(Vocals: "It's only 4 degrees, it's only 4 degrees / It's only 4 degrees, it's only 4 degrees")

Hrishikesh: Could you just explain the premise of "4 degrees" and where that phrase came from?

Anohni: So, about 14 years ago, in the science journals and in consumer-ready science unpackings of global warming, they were delivering us these charts that would say, "What will one degree of warming look like? What will two degrees, three

degrees, four degrees, and six degrees?"

And they always said six degrees' warming was the point of no return.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Anohni: The world would become uninhabitable.

Four degrees, at the time I wrote the song, which was actually 2012, was being described in science journals as an apocalyptic shift in the environment, in the biosphere, in the stratosphere, and in the ways that it would affect us and our civilizations.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hm.

Anohni: But even two degrees promises the end of the coral systems, and increasingly, forest systems. By the time you get to four degrees, you've pretty much wrapped up all of the gentle systems that have taken millions of years to emerge. You know, the gentle systems of balance, the very beautiful choreography of interdependence that pours forth when nature is in balance.

So "4 Degrees" was kind of a battle cry, a bugle cry of an apocalyptic future. And the idea with the song was to shock people into realizing how perverse it was that we were invoking a level of suffering that we weren't prepared for. The end of life on Earth.

But I was suggesting, by saying, "Let's go, it's only four degrees!" I was trying to embody the voice of people that will drive us to extinction, in the alcoholic style of denial. And the harm that they particularly will have facilitated will reverberate.

So, in many ways, I think that was part of the seduction of "4 Degrees;" for me to take the position of someone that was delighting in this collapse.

But at the same time, it's not entirely sarcastic. Because it's also, like, a more honest reckoning with the reality of my carbon footprint.

(Vocals: "I wanna hear the dogs crying for water / I wanna see fish go belly-up in the sea")

Yeah. If I want to see the dogs crying for water, I want to see the fish go belly-up in the sea. Because every time I take a plane to do a concert, that's effectively what I'm inviting. So there is a voice in me that feels this way. Or at least should be feeling this way. If it's not naming it, it's because it's in a state of denial. But because of the, like, the firewalls of capitalism, I've been shielded from the impacts of my daily footprint. In every Seamless meal that I eat, in every distance

that I travel.

Hrishikesh: That's so interesting, because I've always heard the first version of what you were talking about, singing from the point of view of like a heartless villain who doesn't care about the effects of climate change, or even kind of delights in them. But I never thought about the idea that you could be the villain. That this isn't a character that you're making up, but you're singing about your own complicit part in all of this.

Anohni: It's the most excruciating part. Because I can't point a finger at Donald Trump and not see a part of myself in him, as a passive beneficiary of his brutal policy. Just as any white person in America is a beneficiary of all the racist and monstrous policies of imperialism that led to this Goldilocks zone of our petrochemical comforts.

Because it's not just the voice of the other.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hm.

Anohni: It is my voice. You know, it is my intention. And I think that that's something that I've tried quite brazenly to embody. This idea that, that this illness that our society suffered from was also within me.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Anohni and Hudson Mohawke continues after this.

Hrishikesh: What was your reaction to what Anohni did with the instrumental you sent her?

Ross: I remember she's sending the song back to me with some kind of rough vocals that actually are about real issues, and I was like, God, these are so, like, heartfelt and beautiful and delicate and there was so much feeling and emotion in just the recordings of them.

Hrishikesh: Is there something that she does vocally, in particular, that you really love?

Ross: It's at the end of one of the verses, where the line is, "I want to see them boil."

(Vocals: "I wanna see this world, I wanna see it boil / I wanna see this world, I wanna see it boil")

The kind of vibrato on that "boil." It's so kind of haunting, but it's so beautiful at

the same time. And it's not only the voice, but the delivery.

Hrishikesh: Did the instrumental change at all? Did you change it after getting sort of like the first draft or first round of vocals?

Ross: Yeah. The arrangement changed and we did all of Dan's synth parts.

Anohni: Oh, right! The death siren.

("death siren" synth melody)

Ross: Yeah, this is Daniel. Dan brought this to bring about this emotional response. He's a master of that.

Anohni: Dan is, he's such a sensitive composer. Dan's themes are not something I could ever conceive of. He has a, a very fluid, idiosyncratic grasp of melody and counter melodies that I could never put my finger on.

(more "death siren")

Hrishikesh: What was it like for you to collaborate in this way with, you know, not just one, but two different producers, both of whom have their own very distinct and, you know, specific aesthetics? What was it like for you to work with both of them together?

Anohni: They were amazing together. Hudson actually helped facilitate a more productive relationship between me and Dan.

Hrishikesh: Mm.

Anohni: Because it sort of loosened up my grips about what the creative process should entail.

And Ross was also like a master of the emotional rush. So, between the two of them, they really were quite amazing.

This was really the first album I ever wrote so collaboratively with other people. I was so proud of the work that they did, and I felt so supported by them. And I think that they caught the fever of the record in a way, because there wasn't really anything else saying these things at that time.

(Vocals: "I wanna burn the sky, I wanna burn the breeze / I wanna see the animals die in the trees / Ooh, let's go, let's go, it's only 4 degrees / Ooh, let's go, let's go, it's only 4 degrees")

Ross: It's actually one of the most personal records to me that I've done. It had this sort

of gravitas to it. And during the making of it, I was unsure if that was gonna translate. But it really, really worked. And it really was like an eye-opener for me.

I didn't quite realize the gravity or the magnitude of it at the time of making it. Otherwise I probably would have freaked out and never finished it. But the way Anohni interpreted the instrumentals and delivered the vocals, and the way Daniel brought his elements, it was like, oh, these loops that have been sat on my hard drive, they're like alive now, you know?

Hrishikesh: Do you believe now, in 2025, that art has the power to effect social change?

Anohni: I, I've never believed it actually had the power to effect social change.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Anohni: I don't think it does. Personally, I don't. But I do think there's power in art. I do think there's power in music, especially. It's like the bugle for an army. My job was to sing the song of my people. People that are on the frontlines of dreaming the most productively about social transformation.

I went into this project maybe with the delusion that I was going to be confronting power. But I think, in the end, the people that this music most served were people that felt exactly the same way I do. I think it was this album that really made me realize that people don't listen to music that they don't agree with. People listen to music that affirms them.

Hrishikesh: Well, the album was called Hopelessness, and I was wondering if that's what you still feel now?

Anohni: Yeah, I mean, it's a feeling. I think the word there is "feel."

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Anohni: Like, hopelessness is a feeling. That's all it is. It's not an indication of what's happening or what's going to happen. It's just another feeling. But the feeling isn't that relevant, except in how it motivates you from day to day. So if hopelessness as a feeling is disempowering you in your activism or in your engagement, then I would say don't entertain it.

For me, I need to, like, honor all my feelings.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Anohni: You know, maybe don't drown in it, but, I needed to say it. Hope is irrelevant. It

doesn't pardon you from the table of the conversation, it doesn't pardon you from the anxiety of what's really happening. This is happening, and it's continuing to happen. And there is no exit strategy for this conversation.

So yes. I feel extremely hopeless. And does that matter? No.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "4 Degrees" by Anohni, in its entirety.

("4 Degrees" by ANOHNi)

Visit songexploder.net/Anohni to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Four Degrees." You'll also find a link to listen to the episode that Oneohtrix Point Never did, back in 2016.

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.