

**Song Exploder**  
**Gigi Perez - Sailor Song**  
**Episode 296**

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.

Gigi Perez is a singer and songwriter from Florida, and at 25 years old, she's already had so many ups and downs in her music career. She started sharing her songs on TikTok, where they got enough attention that she got signed to a major label deal, but that ultimately didn't pan out. Soon after that, as an independent artist again, she had her biggest breakout hit, with "Sailor Song." She released it in July 2024, and it went viral on TikTok. Now, it has over a billion streams on Spotify alone, and it's a part of her new album, which came out in April 2025. In this episode, you'll hear how the song evolved from her first voice memo to the final version, which she recorded in her childhood bedroom. I talked to Gigi about how "Sailor Song" came about, and about all the different parts of herself that she put into it—her faith, grief, desire, and more.

*("Sailor Song" by GIGI PEREZ)*

*(Vocals: "Won't you kiss me on the mouth and love me like a sailor / And when you get a taste, can you tell me what's my flavor / I don't believe in God, but I believe that you're my savior / My mom says that she's worried, but I'm covered in His favor / And when we're getting dirty, I forget all that is wrong / I sleep so I can see you 'cause I hate to wait so long / I sleep so I can see you and I hate to wait so long")*

Gigi: My name is Gigi Perez.

I grew up in the church, and the whole nine yards of it. I think everyone in my life was kind of surprised when they saw me starting to play the guitar. But, you know, if you're, like, a 7-year-old being exposed to the concept of eternity, and you don't really have the emotional intelligence or tools to understand any of it, you know, it causes a lot of questions. And so I think that songwriting was just the way for me to, like, kinda lay everything out. Like, okay, this is what I think is going on right now inside of me, and what's happening out there. And I was able to, for the first time, really process what was happening.

Like, when I was 15 and I was songwriting for the first time, that was the first time that I acknowledged to myself that I liked girls. And that was a whole can of worms that I opened. Acknowledging that, and what it was gonna take to really understand that. I did that through music.

Hrishikesh: Where were you when your songwriting first started?

Gigi: I grew up in, um, South Florida. There's not really a music scene for the kind of music that I was making. So I pulled out loans, (chuckles) and I went to school for music. I did probably a full year of school. Half of it was online because COVID hit. And then my sister passed away that summer. She passed away, and that was a, you know, very dark time in my life and my family's life. And I just hit this point where I just felt like I had nothing to, to lose and I was so desperate for connection. I was really desperate to have some sort of distraction from this, like, very massive hole in my heart and in my life. So I just started posting these songs.

And then I got signed when I was 20. Go through my first record deal. And there were a lot of really beautiful moments from that experience. But it was also full of a lot of resistance and nobody knows what's going on with TikTok and how it's affecting the music industry. And I was like a Guinea pig, you know? So I leave the music business and everything that that meant.

And I was grateful that my parents let me come back home. And they were very happy about it. And, I was like, happy to be back. But also there were notes of defeat, and of, you know, I'm 24 and I don't know what I'm doing, and I'm applying for freelance work to, like, write a happy birthday song for, like, an 8-year-old and nobody's answering. So I'm not even getting work, but I'm trying.

Hrishikesh: And so, in the middle of all this, how did "Sailor Song" first start? What was happening that day?

Gigi: It was February 29th. I was on my bed in my childhood room. I go to these chords.

*(guitar chords)*

Just messing around.

I was like, "Kiss me on the mouth and love me like a sailor." And then it just immediately came out.

*(Voice memo guitar and vocals: "Kiss me on the mouth and love me like a sailor / And when you get a taste, can you tell me what's my flavor / I don't believe in God, but I believe that he's my savior / I try to call on him, 'cause I think that I have favor / And when we're getting dirty, I forget all that is wrong / I sleep so I can see you 'cause I hate to wait so long / I sleep so I can see you 'cause I hate to wait so long / I hate to wait so long / Ahh...")*

It was just the chorus of the song. I made a video of it that same day.

Hrishikesh: And you posted the video on TikTok?

Gigi: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Because I was like, I, I was like, I fuck with this. Like, sorry, I don't know, can I say the f-word on here?

Hrishikesh: Sure.

Gigi: Okay.

Hrishikesh: So you wrote the chorus.

Gigi: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: What was the story in your mind, like what was the song at that point, even in that little nascent version of it. What did you think the story was gonna be, and, um, where was it gonna go from there?

Gigi: You know, I really, I loved that I got across that feeling. That like, desperate, fervent attraction to someone and like, sense of like, let's just get outta here. Like, this life and all this shit is so crazy. But you're my focal point, in an otherwise very chaotic world.

Hrishikesh: Was that something that you were feeling at the time?

Gigi: Yeah. Fully. Very clear, like I was waking up yearning for this person, you know, going to sleep yearning for them. You know, that fun little game.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Gigi: So yeah, it was very much, like, real. And it's just a feeling of relief to be able to get it out. Like, saying something in a way that explains exactly what I'm feeling, and in a way that I just didn't expect myself to be able to describe, is the relief for me.

Hrishikesh: After you'd written those words for the chorus, where did you go next?

Gigi: I knew that I wanted the, the song to grow. You want it to get smaller and sweet, and you also want to know that you're climbing to that more explosive moment that comes in the chorus. I remember the melody following me from this song that I had written a while ago:

*(earlier song vocals: "Little baby on the wall / I don't know that I am small / I probably don't think much of it all / It all")*

Hrishikesh: Okay, so you have this older song, and you kept the vocal melody, but you changed the lyrics?

Gigi: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Was it hard to re-imagine it with new words?

Gigi: Certain melodies that I write become so easy to write words to. With "Sailor" and the verses, I was like "I saw her in the rightest away."

*(guitar chords)*

It was funny, 'cause I said it and I was like, that's not really, you don't say that, but it, like, happened.

"I saw her in the rightest way, looking like Anne Hathaway."

*(Voice memo guitar and vocals: "I saw her in the rightest way / Looking like Anne Hathaway")*

Hrishikesh: How much do you feel compelled to make it as close to your actual experience versus fictionalizing it? Which is a roundabout way of me saying like, do you think that the person that you are writing about actually looks like Anne Hathaway? Or were you like, "that's a nice rhyme"?

Gigi: I love to write about the real things. But it's the feeling of it. So, for Anne Hathaway, it's just, like, the beauty. It's like, oh my God, like she's gorgeous. Like, I grew up watching *Princess Diaries* and *Devil Wears Prada*, so, it's the sentiment of like that unbelievable, breathtaking beauty that, you know, reminded me.

At that time I had been messing on Ableton. And, like, every single day I'm learning how to record and produce. And I knew that I wanted to take it seriously. So I bought a MIDI keyboard.

I knew how to record acoustic guitars and my vocals. And I think that's like the heartbeat of what makes it mine, is how I record guitars. And,

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Gigi: Doing that, I think, really set the bed. And so, I think there were like five guitars on there.

*(layered guitars)*

The vocals, for me, that was just the biggest learning piece of like, how do I like my vocals to sound and to sit? And so, there's one in the center,

*(center vocals: "And maybe I tried other things / But nothing can capture the sting")*

One in left and right:

*(left and right vocals: "Of the venom she's gonna spit out right now")*

Hrishikesh: What made you decide that the right approach was multiple guitars, multiple vocals?

Gigi: So, I have this friend Eric, his producer name is RKS. And he helped me a lot when it came to learning how to record and produce. Like, he was the first person I was ever in the studio with when I was 19. And at the time, he was doing, like, EDM music. And so, I would go over to his studio and he would just give me lessons on things and he taught me to record a guitar on the left and record a guitar on the right. And I was like, okay, that's cool.

He makes very different music than I make, but I kind of applied things that he taught me in a different way, if that makes sense. Like in a different context, and took that and ran with it.

*(bass)*

But I remember I found that like, sizzly, deep, brooding bass. The depth and the feeling, like, it felt dramatic. It felt traumatic. All the "-atics." You know.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Gigi: Like, it felt like I just was, like, making a sonic movie in my mind out of, like, intense feelings that I live with.

So the song, the way that it's sung is from a place of like, just feeling so out of control. And, you know, I did, I did worship team growing up.

Hrishikesh: What's that?

Gigi: Worship team, (chuckles) oh, what is worship team? I'll tell you. There was an American church and then there was also a, a Spanish evangelical church. Most of my life, I was in the Spanish one. And before the service, you sing worship songs. I did that. And I felt very connected to this divine thing, and I knew it through the medium of Christianity. And it was always very intense. There's

people praying, people speaking in tongues. It's very, very heavy.

And I'm on, like, the stage singing while this is happening. You like, put your hands up, you're like, feeling the Holy Spirit.

And it's such a relief to sing. It's such a spiritual experience for me. Then I started thinking, I was like, maybe the reason why I sing the way I do is 'cause I'm desperate to connect, and I feel that divine thing. That may have affected the sonics of "Sailor Song," as like, I feel like I was just desperate to connect to that thing.

*(bass and vocals: "She took my fingers to her mouth / The kind of thing that makes you proud / That nothing else had ever / Worked out, worked out")*

Hrishikesh: I just wanna ask you about the lyrics here.

Gigi: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Because, how do I put this, it's not *not* an explicit song.

Gigi: (chuckles) Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Did that cause any ripples for you, with your Christian upbringing?

Gigi: Hmm. You know, I think I, like, really swept all that under the rug when I came out with my first song and I said, "Fuck me right" in it. So I feel like I got everything out of the way.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, I could see that.

Gigi: I don't fear being explicit. Sometimes, like to a fault! I'm like, do I have, like a, like a potty mouth? Or like, I don't know. I understand, like, why that would be upsetting. Not upsetting, but like, are like, the pastors gonna hear that? Granted, I think the most explicit thing that I could have said was not even the sexual aspects. It was me saying, "I don't believe in God."

*(Vocals: "I don't believe in God, but I believe that you're my savior / My mom says that she's worried, but I'm covered in His favor")*

And like, that's a whole thing. Like, it caused like in, in my life a very big discourse of conversations about faith and religion and all that kind of stuff. But to me, like, I love the conversation that it put me in, you know.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Gigi: It doesn't, like, make me wince. Because I just, I don't let myself be ashamed that I thought that, or that I said that. You know, there are people that think that way and if it makes you uncomfortable, then like, that's okay. It's not for you. You know?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Gigi: The thing is, like, I don't know. I think that if, like, my parents can get over it, everybody can. Like, you know what I'm saying? Like...

Hrishikesh: Yeah. But, what did it mean for you, personally, to put it in the song?

Gigi: The crisis of faith was very fervent. It's probably, like, always been that way, since I grew up that way. But I think after my sister died, I just really started to... Like, you just slowly lose your reality. It's not like you wake up one day and you don't believe in Jesus. It's many thoughts, over many years, and you kinda just wake up and you're like, I don't know what to believe anymore. And every night I would be laying in my bed till 3AM crying, because I am, like, desperate for a God.

I was having fun with the production and, and learning how to record, like that was my outlet. But it was also a very painful time because of the silence. Because I still feel like that 12-year-old trying to understand truth. And so, I think that, for me it was, like, shameful to say, but it was the truth. It was the truth in the moment. And I felt very scared of that. And, I knew that that was gonna be in the song, because it needed to be, because it was how I felt. And I'm okay with that right now.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Gigi Perez continues after this.

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Hrishikesh: The song starts with this sound:

*(echoing saxophone)*

What is that, and where did that come from?

Gigi: That is a Splice sample. I was like, these feel like pelicans. They sound like birds to me.

When I heard it for the first time, I just felt like, something's about to happen.

When I started the song, I was like, okay, this strum is like, (hums) that strum pattern felt so powerful that it almost felt like there needed to be, like, a call.

*(guitar strumming & vocals: "Oohaaay")*

That's what my voice wanted to do.

Hrishikesh: Had you sung like that ever before, in a song?

Gigi: No, but I think in the last two years of my life, I started to implement more of my classical training.

My older sister, she was an opera singer and I think that maybe there are pieces of, like, me that wanna feel closer to her. And so, I used that part of my voice that I didn't use when I was younger.

Hrishikesh: Hm. That's beautiful.

*(Vocals: "Oohaaay")*

Gigi: So Noah Weinman, he is a producer, and a mutual friend of ours connected us, 'cause I was looking for a friend that was down to collaborate. Someone that was interested in co-production.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Gigi: And so, I sent it to him, and he was like, "Oh my God." He heard it, and he immediately knew where he wanted to take it, and he was like, oh, like, I think adding, like, light percussion.

*(drums)*

I was so excited to see what he brings to it. 'Cause I knew that I wanted piano on it.

*(add piano)*

One of my favorite parts about the song and what he added was just the like (hums). It's kinda like, one note, but it, like, propels the song into the next part of it. It gave it a very intentional phrasing, section by section.

Hrishikesh: And can you tell me where this part came from?



*(trumpet)*

Gigi: That is also a Splice sample. Because I knew that I was, like, interested in trumpets, but I don't know anybody that, like, plays the trumpet. So I was just looking for stuff, and I came across that on Splice.

And I was like playing it right over the chorus.

*(trumpet and vocals: "I don't believe in God, but I believe that you're my savior / I know that you've been worried, but you're dripping in my favor")*

Hrishikesh: And do you remember how you felt when you first heard those parts together?

Gigi: My mind was blown, because I had never even, like, used a sample in that way.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Gigi: But it felt like once I heard it, it was super integral that I was like, I can't just, like, not use it. That is *the* sample.

Hrishikesh: So how was the song feeling to you, after you had the samples and all the tracks from Noah, and everything that you'd done?

Gigi: Oh, I was, like, over the moon. I was so happy with it. I remember dancing like crazy.

*("Sailor Song" by GIGI PEREZ)*

*(Vocals: "And when we're getting dirty, I forget all that is wrong / I sleep so I can see you 'cause I hate to wait so long / I sleep so I can see you and I hate to wait so long")*

Hrishikesh: The desperation that you were so happy to capture in the song, the desperate yearning and also the desperate feelings around faith and loss of faith and stuff like that...

Gigi: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Is that a feeling that you still have, these days?

Gigi: I think that that was scratching the surface.

Hrishikesh: Like that was just the start of the desperation?

Gigi: (chuckles) Unfortunately. I think that it was acknowledging it through music for

the first time. Because it's hard, sometimes, to find the words. But for some reason, if I do it in a song, I can see things a little bit more clearly.

Hrishikesh: So, do you think the experience of writing this song has changed you?

Gigi: This song completely changed my life and my circumstances as I knew them. I haven't been home all year, 'cause I've been touring. Honestly, my life has changed very, very drastically.

But the biggest thing for me is that this song put me in a place to find my community. There are people who feel the same and people that are listening. It's helping me feel less alone. And that I find beautiful.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sailor Song" by Gigi Perez, in its entirety.

*("Sailor Song" by GIGI PEREZ)*

Visit [songexploder.net](https://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Sailor Song," and you can watch the music video.

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.