

**Song Exploder**  
**Ethel Cain - Nettles**  
**Episode 299**

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.

Hayden Anhedönia has been making music under the name Ethel Cain since 2019. But it's not just a band name or a moniker; Ethel Cain is a fictional character, a sort of alter ego that Hayden's been creating and world building around throughout her albums. The first Ethel Cain album, *Preacher's Daughter*, came out in 2022. It ended up blowing up, and it made Hayden the first openly trans artist with an album in the top ten on the Billboard chart. In 2025, she put out the second Ethel Cain album, called *Willoughby Tucker, I'll Always Love You*. It's a prequel to the first album. For this episode, I talked to Hayden about how she made the song "Nettles." As you're about to hear, it took on a lot of different forms, over several years, before she got to the final version.

*("Nettles" by ETHEL CAIN)*

*(Vocals: "Tell me all the time not to worry (worry) / And think of all the time I'll, I'll have with you / When I won't wake up on my own (wake up on my own), wake up on my own / Held close all the time, knowin' I'm half of you")*

Hayden: My name is Hayden Anhedönia, also known as Ethel Cain. And the project of Ethel Cain is like this big, kind of sweeping narrative.

Hrishikesh: And what era is the world of Ethel Cain set in?

Hayden: Uh, *Willoughby Tucker* spans from 1986 to 1990. So it goes through her last two years of high school and her first two years of adulthood. And it spans that four year gap of her relationship with the titular character, Willoughby Tucker.

It starts with her desperation to be loved. And then it moves into her neglect of her lover and the way she casts his real person to the wayside to fall in love with a projected version of him.

Hrishikesh: And what made you decide to put it in that era to begin with?

Hayden: Well, you know, the first love story that I ever saw was my parents'. And so I always heard a lot of stories about my parents falling in love and all that stuff, like towards the end of the 80s, early 90s. That was their love story, and that was when my mom was in high school.

So I always just loved the idea of love set against that backdrop. That's all the stories that I heard, all the pictures that I saw growing up. It very much was, I just found that time period fascinating. And I always thought that was like a cool backdrop for a story.

Hrishikesh: And where, where does the story take place?

Hayden: It takes place in Shady Grove, Alabama, which is actually a real place. There is a real Shady Grove, Alabama, but it's not that specific one. Shady Grove to me is a very "Nowhere, USA."

My family is from Shady Grove, Florida. And Shady Grove has that feeling of an era gone by. But again, it's like a fictionalized version of it.

Hrishikesh: Um, what do you remember about the first day that you started working on "Nettles?"

Hayden: I remember I had just moved into my house in Alabama, like, not even a week before. I had no furniture set up. It was August. I think I wrote "Nettles" August 17th, 2021.

I remember going outside and it was a beautiful hot day and it felt so good to be back in the South, and I was just so happy to be home. And I was, like, running around my yard barefoot. And I stepped on like a spiky plant. And I thought it was a nettle. It was- turned out to be a thistle. But I thought, oh, spiky plant, that's a nettle. And I got in my head, this idea of nettles. And so I just started to kind of write this little ditty. (hums melody)

You know, it was probably like 3, 4PM. It was hot. And the sun was shining and it was coming through my lace curtains and I had my guitar and my, my laptop on the floor and I said, "I just wanna write something that just feels like a return to home."

And I started just kind of strumming the guitar.

*(first demo - acoustic guitar chords)*

I had found this little rhythm and I always usually make simple tunings 'cause I don't play the guitar that well. I'm not really good with, like, my fingers like that. So I made this weird little tuning and I was just sliding back and forth between these couple chords.

I always kind of tend to gravitate towards love songs about, you know, I'm someone who's been through stuff and I'm in love with someone who's been

through stuff and all the anxiety and difficulty of that, of like loving someone through their trauma, loving someone through mine.

Because of, again, my parents' love story and the love story of most of the people in my hometown, it's just, you know, you're in high school, in a small town, you grow up, your boyfriend gets a blue collar job, you are a stay-at-home wife or you do your little thing and just this very simple love, of: you go to work, you come home, you're in your trailer together, you love each other, you go through the trials and tribulations of small town life. And that to me is so romantic.

*(first demo vocals: "We were in a race to grow up / Yesterday, through today, 'til tomorrow")*

When I was a kid, there was a gas plant near our, the house, the trailer I grew up in. My mom would always tell me about this time that it blew up, um, when I was really little, and it exploded. And I remember thinking like, you know, all the guys that worked there... You know, it was kinda this idea of, oh, I'm in love and we're children and "we're in a race to grow up".

But then quickly the real world sets in. "The plant blew up, a piece of shrapnel flew and slowed that part of you." Suddenly, the real world creeps in. We realize we're not immortal. This isn't timeless. This isn't forever.

*(cont. vocals: "But when the plant blew up / A piece of shrapnel flew and slowed that part of you / The doctors gave you until the end of the night / But not 'til daylight (Not 'til daylight), not 'til daylight (Not 'til daylight)")*

You know, we're just two people at the mercy of life. And we're getting scared. This is getting hard. Love is not just, you find it and then you have it and life is good because of it. It's, it's difficult and it's scary and things can happen. Things can take your love away from you, and how terrifying that is. And is it still worth this pain?

*(cont. vocals: "Tell me all the time not to worry / And think of all the time I'll, I'll have with you / When I won't wake up on my own (Wake up on my own), wake up on my own / Held close all the time, knowing I'm half of you")*

It was me trying to work out the ways that I always predicted I would be in love. And how badly I wanted it, but, I think, how badly it scared me.

Hrishikesh: So at the time when you were writing this, had you experienced something like that yourself?

Hayden: No. I'd never... you know, I've had my brushes with love and met people and got scared and ran away almost immediately. Because I, I kind of had this inkling of

an idea that, this is too much for me and I'm scared. And if I even tried, I knew I was gonna make a mess. So I just had a really good idea of what I was gonna have to work through, accepting people for as they are, not as you want them to be.

And so I kind of gave myself a playground to play it out. You know, me kind of saying, life is hard, I've been through stuff, I've made a fool of myself, I've been treated so badly and I would never do that to anyone. And, and you've been through stuff, and you've been hurt, we have a past and a present, and then saying, this is so overwhelming. And it's so hard. Just tell me all the time not to worry. Just tell me all the time. And think about the day when we can find our patch of paradise, where I can spend all my time with you and none of this will matter. The two of us together will be enough.

So, it started with, with personal experiences. And then they kind of get, you know, twisted into the Ethel Cain story, because she is, at the end of the day, a part of me.

The demo, as it was, came to me in like an hour.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Hayden: And I put it on my SoundCloud and just said, "Oh, you know, first week in the new house, this is like a little scrap of a song that I wrote." Like, "Here's how I'm feeling." And, you know, that scrap just kinda sat there like that for a while.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Because for me, it would be really hard to be like, oh, here's an unfinished thing, and then share it with people.

Hayden: So for me, the "Nettles" demo isn't really a demo, it's just a different version of "Nettles," but that is also a *complete* finished version of "Nettles" for what it is. The emotion, the intention, it's all intact there. I think sometimes people consider amazing production or crazy composition or whatever, to have more integrity. And it does require more talent and more creativity to really go there and flesh something out. But right now, this is what I have to say.

If I need to revisit it, if I have more to say, I will say more on the topic. But until then, she'll sit pretty just the way that she is. 'Cause I love her in this form, too.

And so the first verse and chorus was what I had for years before I finished the song.

And then, two years later, I was in Mexico. I'm coming back from a festival that we just played, I don't know why it crossed my mind, but I thought, I need to

listen to this.

And I listened to it and said, why is this not on *Willoughby*? This has such a place in it.

And I wanted to explore that kind of difficult, immature, desperate desire. So that's kind of why we went back in time to explore her when she's kind of transitioning from her childhood to adulthood, and the way that that affects this interpersonal relationship that she has.

And that's when I dredged it back up and started working on it.

Hrishikesh: And so how did you start, what was your first step for that?

Hayden: So I was playing Coachella. And I was listening to a lot of, like, super dreamy dream pop. 'Cause I was having a hard year and that's kind of one of my go-tos. And I just love to listen to super soft indie rock. And I said, all right, let's do like, a soft indie rock version of the song.

*(second demo - instrumental)*

So kinda simple drums with a ride. Put some more reverb on it, make it really just kind of twinkly like that.

Hrishikesh: And were you doing that with real drums, or were you programming drums?

Hayden: That was real drums. My good friend Steven Colyer, he did this demo with me. I just recorded some lazy vocals.

*(second demo vocals: "We were in a race to grow up / Yesterday, through today, 'til tomorrow")*

Just kind of wanted to test out that idea of, what if it wasn't so folksy? What if it was more of, kind of, this indie, like, Cigarettes After Sex kind of vibe, or like, kind of Beach House. 'Cause you know, I'm a big fan of both of those artists. Especially when I'm in the desert, you know. I'd never been to Coachella, so I was listening to them a lot and thought, oh, this would be so pretty.

*(cont. vocals: "But when the plant blew up / A piece of shrapnel flew and slowed that part of you")*

But, after I made it, I thought, this has no heart, this has no substance. This isn't "Nettles." And that's kinda why I scrapped that one. That one was very short-lived.

But then I thought, well, I miss the old demo, so I put the original guitar back and slowed it down.

*(original acoustic guitar, slowed)*

That's when I kind of started to marry this, kind of, slower, dreamier quality, but with like, the twang of the original.

So I was in Pittsburgh when I made this, I had moved there, end of 2022. I started to build over the drums and layer stuff with Steven. And that's where I wrote the second verse.

*(third demo vocals: "Lay me down where the trees bend low / Put me down where the greenery stings / I can hear them")*

Hrishikesh: After you made that, did it feel complete, or was it still missing something for you?

Hayden: I felt like the foundation was there, but then I thought, okay, now this needs some kind of flair.

Hrishikesh: What do you mean by flair?

Hayden: Um, I thought it just needed, like pedal steel or, maybe some banjo. I kinda wanna bring it back to this kind of country-ish twangy place, but keep this beautiful lushness of it.

*(fourth demo instrumental and vocals: "Made a fool of myself down on Tennessee Street / It wasn't pretty like the movies / It was ugly, like what they all did to me / And they did to me what I wouldn't do to anyone")*

This version lived for a while. This version lived through the majority of 2023.

But then I thought, maybe it needs to be slower. Maybe it needs to be sadder. Maybe it needs to be devastating.

Hrishikesh: Why did you think it needed to be devastating? Especially for a, a love song?

Hayden: Well, at that point I think that I was starting to kind of go through my, my bout of insecurity with being labeled a pop artist or whatever, and worried that people thought that I was just always making these little ditties. And I thought, well, I need to make something slower and sadder and like, it needs to be less accessible. I don't wanna make something so beautiful. I don't want people to be happy listening to this. I want them to be miserable. So that's where this super

slow demo came from.

*(fifth demo - instrumental)*

Hrishikesh: Was that miserable feeling also a reflection of how you felt at the time?

Hayden: Oh yeah. I mean, after Preacher's Daughter came out, I got so depressed. 'Cause I'd been working on it for years and years and put my whole heart into it. And then, just a bunch of stuff happened with my career. Adjusting to it. Adjusting to being an artist whose work is being dissected.

And I very much got into a mindset of: I hate this. I hate my job, I hate making music, I hate all of this. And I was so angry and sad and I just felt so empty and depressed. And it affected all of my music.

*(fifth demo vocals: "Tell me all the time (tell me all the time) / Not to worry (not to worry) / And think of all the time I'll, / I'll have with you / When we won't wake up on our own, (wake up on our own) wake up on our own / Held close all the time, knowin' it was all for you")*

But very quickly, everybody in my life was like, "This is not it. We don't, we don't want this version of this demo."

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Ethel Cain continues after this.

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Hrishikesh: So what happened after you made that "miserable-sounding" demo?

Hayden: One of my friends said, "You are very obviously not doing well at all. You are not happy and you, like, are visibly different." The whole year it was just lights on, but nobody's home.

So I took a six month break from making music, and then I just started working on this record again in January of this year.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Hayden: I kind of looked at everything that I had and knew what I didn't want, what I did want. And I said, all right, I'm gonna make it simple, strip everything back to just the banjo and the guitar. Took everything off, had my drummer record new drums. Bryan. Bryan did the new drums.

*(final version - live drums)*

I wanted something that was a bit less, like, lazy and kind of swingy and just more of like a, kind of like a pep. Kind of a more of an upbeat drum sound.

And I was like, lemme go to Muscle Shoals. You know, that's kind of like a huge hub for kind of, like, southern rock and country and felt more authentic and real.

And so I went to Muscle Shoals. Had some friends in Muscle Shoals put these, like, instruments on it.

Fiddle,

*(fiddle)*

More banjo,

*(banjo)*

More acoustic guitar,

*(acoustic guitar)*

And pedal steel.

*(pedal steel)*

Those were the instruments that we recorded that day.

*(instruments all together)*

Hrishikesh: And was there a moment or like a session where you tracked all of your final vocals?

Hayden: No. The product is a huge mishmash. It's just like, it's really not that polished. It's just such a, like, conglomeration of all the different periods that I've worked on it and mindsets and whatnot. But um, there's like some takes that I just can't get over, so I'll leave it and then record new takes. That's kinda what I love about it. I can listen and hear all the different times and memories.

*(Vocals: "To love me is to suffer me, and I believe it")*

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about that lyric "to love me is to suffer me"?



Hayden: Well, I've always had this very kind of unhealthy view of love as being, I'm so weak and I'm so pained and I've been through so much. And so, "to love me is to suffer me." Being very self-critical and self-deprecating, but then saying, I need constant validation. I need a man who's big and strong and can handle me and will like, hold me down and protect me. And he's so mean to everybody but me. Like, you know. That kind of, possibly corny, um, view of love.

But then I thought, that can't be real. That's so shallow and two-dimensional. So then I said, let's dig a little deeper. Let's say, he's scared of becoming his father.

*(Vocals: "That picture on the wall you're scared of looks just like you / I wanna bleed, I wanna hurt the way that boys do")*

"Nettles" is saying, I'm afraid, you're afraid. You've been through things, I've been through things. But I love you.

And "Nettles" is still the fantasy. Like, I don't wanna confront the problems. I'd rather you just tell me that it's not real and that one day we'll just magically be together and it won't be hard. And you can kind of get the feeling that Ethel Cain is not going to take the right path because she's avoidant and she's deflective, and she would rather live in her head, in this delusion.

Which is so funny because, coincidentally, I'm now in my very first relationship, and it is exactly how I thought it was going to be, and I am acting exactly the way that I predicted I would. And so it's been very funny, "Nettles" coincidentally coming out at the same time that I'm feeling all these emotions again, but for real this time, not hypothetical.

I mean, the week that it was coming out, I was literally texting him the same stuff. I was saying, "I'm so anxious, because for the first time in my life I have someone that I care about." It's so scary and, and it's all kind of coming to pass.

I just listen to these songs and say, okay, this is the fork in the road. I can either go down this and do this the way I wrote about in the song, and ruin it. Or I can learn from my own predictions and choose to do it differently.

We would listen to the song together. I would always sing "Tell me all the time."

*(Vocals: "Tell me all the time")*

And then he would look at me and go, "Not to worry."

*(Vocals: "Not to worry (not to worry) / And think of all the time I'll, I'll have with you / When I won't wake up on my own (Wake up on my own), wake up on my own")*

Yeah. That's why I always call it a cautionary tale because I say, look, this is what happens if you fall in love and you project things onto them and you don't actually learn who they are, and you neglect them as a person. You're gonna drive them away.

So let me run this scenario in a controlled environment, like in my head, and learn from it before I have to learn from it, really. In person. That was a much easier way to go about it than actually falling in love for the first time with a good person and ruining it.

And even with the cautionary tale, I'm still like, I'm crazy. I'm putting that man through hell right now. Um,

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Hayden: And so I will run that cautionary tale time and time again if it means I don't have to end up the same way that Ethel Cain ends up.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Nettles," by Ethel Cain, in its entirety.

*("Nettles" by ETHEL CAIN)*

Visit [songexploder.net](https://songexploder.net) to learn more, including some footnotes that go with the episode. You'll find links to buy or stream "Nettles," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, 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.