

Song Exploder
Hayley Kiyoko - Girls Like Girls
Episode 316

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.

Hayley Kiyoko is a singer, songwriter, author, and director from Los Angeles. She was a child actor on Disney and Nickelodeon, and briefly in a girl group called The Stunners. But then, she started her career as a solo artist. In 2015, she put out the EP *This Side of Paradise*, and one of the songs on it was "Girls Like Girls." She co-wrote it with Lily May-Young and Owen Thomas, and it was produced by James Flannigan. Hayley co-directed the music video for it, and when the song and the video came out, it was an absolute phenomenon. It became a lesbian anthem; Rolling Stone named it one of the most inspiring LGBTQ songs of all time. Hayley's legion of fans gave her the nickname "Lesbian Jesus." In 2023, Hayley adapted the song into a bestselling coming-of-age novel. And in June 2026, she made her feature film directorial debut, with the movie adaptation of "Girls Like Girls." So for this episode, Hayley and I talked about how it all started with the making of that song.

("Girls Like Girls" by HAYLEY KIYOKO)

(Vocals: "Saw your face, heard your name, gotta get with you / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new")

Hayley: I'm Hayley Kiyoko.

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like you've always been a performer? Is that just something that's been a part of you since the beginning?

Hayley: So, a fun fact is, I wore a back brace in middle school for two years. I had really bad scoliosis. And I credit that experience and moment for the ability to fake my confidence, 'cause it was sink or swim. It was like, I'm wearing this back brace and I'm gonna get bullied or I'm gonna have to pretend that this is the coolest thing you could do, is, is fix your scoliosis. And that's the direction I went. And so I kind of created this facade of confidence. But when I would come home, I felt very alone and very isolated, and I didn't feel like I had real connection.

I knew I was queer since I was like five or six. And, you know, I have a specific memory of seeing NSYNC at the Staples Center. And I watched the boy band and I was like, "Oh my gosh. I wanna be on stage singing a song with screaming girls all over the place. Like, that is my dream." I wanted to be this pop star. And I was like, "How does that work?"

I was like, "Okay, I love writing music on my acoustic guitar in my bedroom." And, you know, I would write songs about girls all the time, but I would change the pronouns from she/her to he/him in my journals, in case someone found them. So like, even though I knew my truth, you're still even having to hide in your own space. So I really struggled with, like, self worth and self love.

Hrishikesh: I feel like people might be surprised to learn that, because weren't you on TV and already kind of a young star at that point?

Hayley: Well, the first time I booked a role I was 17. So I wasn't like a kid kid. But I ended up starting to book commercials where I played a musician, like I was in like a Cinnamon Toast Crunch commercial, and I was like rocking out on the guitar. And I, like, would pretend to be a musician, but I really wanted to be a real musician. And I had a brief stint of being in a girl group, way, even before I was a solo artist. And I was really exposed to the male gaze and performing for these men in the music industry. And I'd never felt safe to tell people that I was a lesbian because I was worried that I would lose my job, or like, I wouldn't be supported in the group or stuff like that.

So there was a big fear and disconnect where I, I really wanted to be myself, but I felt like being myself was going to hinder my ability to be successful. And so I really struggled being able to connect those dots.

Hrishikesh: What do you remember about the first day of working on "Girls Like Girls?"

Hayley: It was a rainy day in Los Angeles, and I was still searching for my sound and my voice. I was with another two writers, who are a married couple, Owen and Lily.

We had written a couple songs prior, and I remember it was raining and Lily was like, "What are you most afraid of, to sing about? Like, what is the scariest thing you could share, that you've never shared before?"

And she had just such a warmth to her. And I had known I was a lesbian for a very long time, but I, I never really came out to people, especially like coworkers. But I felt very, like, safe and comfortable with her. And I felt like she wouldn't judge me for who I was. And so I came out to her. Started crying.

And she was like, "Why don't we write about that?"

I remember talking to Lily and just talking about how it was so frustrating because when I was like, fantasizing over my crush or like, wanting to be with a girl, I was always comparing myself to a guy. Like, I wish I could say this and say that and say this. As a woman, you're jealous of what men get to experience because

women are still not, like, equal in society or we're taught that we're not equal. And it's so frustrating because girls like girls like boys do. And I always found myself in like a love triangle almost, where it was me or him. And it's like, my feelings are just as valid as this guy who's in love with this girl. And we were just having this conversation and she was like, "Well, why don't we just, like, say that? 'Girls like girls, like boys do.'"

And so we started on the chorus, and started with that as like the foundation of what the song would be.

(Chorus vocals: "Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new")

And then the convo was kind of like, who I wish I was at that time, which was confident and like, *I'm gonna steal your girl*. And like, you know, who I wanted to be that I wasn't.

Hrishikesh: Did that point to any musical starting place for you?

Hayley: I grew up playing drums, so percussion and rhythm has always been a huge inspiration for me. And I feel like when I listen to a great song with an amazing snare and amazing kick, like I'm just in it.

And so when I think of, like, "cool" or like "what I wanted" or "confidence", I think of drums.

Hrishikesh: Did you end up making a demo that day?

Hayley: Yeah, we did, but I have no idea where that is. Actually, we should pause this and I should try to find it.

(demo instrumental)

Hrishikesh: Found it?

Hayley: Yes! (laughs)

(demo background vocals: "ooh-ooh, boy / ooh-ooh, boy")

We did make a demo. Owen produced it.

(demo vocals: "Saw your face, heard your name, gotta get with you / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new / Isn't this why we came? Tell me if you feel it too / Tell me if you're in, won't you come out? / Tell me now / If you're in, won't you come out? / Boy")

Yeah, we finished the whole song that day.

Hrishikesh: And so, after you had that demo, did you have something in mind for where you wanted the song to go, in terms of the production?

Hayley: I just wanted it to feel like me. And I think as an artist, you're always searching, like, who are you, in sonic form? You kind of, like, do writing sessions and you meet different people and you're almost like dating, you know? And you're, like, figuring out who you like working with.

Hrishikesh: Mmm.

Hayley: And so I met James Flannigan uh, in 2013. I just really loved his charisma and we really connected and aligned. I think he was in LA for a period of time, but he lived in the UK. He lived in London. And so we met early on and then when I started working on This Side of Paradise, I called him up. I was like, "Hey, like, I have no money. Would you want to work with me on my EP?"

And he was like, "If you find a place to stay and you come to me, absolutely." And so I flew to London and we wrote for like a week. And then a couple months later, I was like, "How do we get back together? Because you live in London. I live in LA," and he was like, "Well, I'll come to LA. Do you have a place to stay?"

And I was like, "Well, you could stay with my parents, and we could make, like, a makeshift studio in the garage." And so he agreed. So he lived with my parents,

Hrishikesh: Wow.

Hayley: For, I think it was like two or three weeks. And he came out, it was just me and James, and we produced the record.

So, my relationship with James was very collaborative. It was never like, this is what I think you should do, or else.

You know, I had just been in a girl group where you didn't get to write the songs. You didn't get to have any say. I had been through that. And that's not the experience I wanted when writing my music.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Hayley Kiyoko continues after this.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember the first time you shared this song with James?

Hayley: Yeah, it was interesting. So we had picked the songs for the EP. And I didn't put "Girls Like Girls" on the EP. And I didn't want to because I wasn't ready to come out. I was like, once I release this, people know I'm gay and then I can't turn back. Like it's over. It's over for me. But I was like, I think I should throw it on, like, it's the best song. Like, why wouldn't I put it on? And so it was kind of like a last minute addition to it. I remember playing it for James. And I think he knew the weight of what this moment was for me and, you know, I think he took that seriously.

Hrishikesh: The song is, correct me if I'm wrong, all vocals and electronic sounds.

Hayley: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: What determined those being the sounds?

Hayley: I think, at the time, budget. (chuckles) But at that time I was so, like, synth-forward. I loved like, Yeah Yeah Yeahs and TV On The Radio and M83 and, you know, so, that's all I wanted.

And he had, like, a Novation station. It's this little mini keyboard. And there was like, like 80 presets on it, or something like that. And we'd kind of go through, and he's like, how does this feel?

(synth melody)

How does that feel?

(synth hit)

You're really just twiddling and, and feeling it out, because you don't know where the destination is.

But I think as a musician you hear something and you're like, yeah, that's it. That feels right.

(bass synth)

That "wah-wah, wah" that part, I felt like was kind of the identity of the song.

(synth drum beat)

It is a weird beat when you isolated it. (laughs) I was like, where's the tempo? I was like, it's almost like a weird, like, shuffle.

To me, that's the heart of the record, those two sounds. There's, like, a confidence in the drive of it, but there's also hesitancy in between. And I think the whole metaphor of this song is like, I was trying to lead with confidence, but I was actually really hesitant. And so I think weirdly that really mirrors how I felt. The opening line of "Girls Like Girls" is "Stealing kisses from your missus, does it make you freak out?" It's like, I'm pursuing her. And why couldn't I pursue her?

(vocals: "Stealing kisses from your missus / Does it make you freak out? / Got you fussing, got you worried / Scared to let your guard down / Boys")

Hrishikesh: You know, you said that you used to write your songs on acoustic guitar.

Hayley: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Where did the guitar fit into your sense of your musical identity at this point in your life?

Hayley: It didn't, and I was trying to remove it.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Hayley: When you have a guitar in your bedroom and all you have is your guitar, you just want every other instrument but the guitar. At least from my experience.

And my dream was to be able to work with a producer and be able to record my music and use, like, anything else but the guitar. I just wanted to get to experience other sounds and things that I, I personally couldn't create or achieve, just on my own.

You know, James is such a great instrumentalist. Finding these little pieces to really just elevate the journey of the song.

(instrumental + vocals: "We will be everything that we'd ever need, oh / I'm real and I don't feel like boys")

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like your acting work helped with the performance of the singing part?

Hayley: Yeah, I think so. I think my acting experience of, just, like, putting this cap of confidence. I mean, I do have this side of myself that is very confident and I think it's just, I remember recording it and James, you know, being like, "Feel confident

in what you're saying." And we would try different things. I tried whispering it, I tried talking it, I tried shouting it, and it just kind of sat in this kind of more conversational tone that ended up shining.

(vocals: "Tell the neighbors I'm not sorry if I'm breaking walls down / Building your girl's second story, ripping all your floors out")

It's just so interesting to listen to those lyrics. It's like, damn, those, those are some cocky lyrics. (laughs) Those are some really confident lyrics there.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember how you got to that second verse?

Hayley: Lily's such a visual person and, you know, the chorus is so, just, direct. And I remember we were talking and she was like, "Let's build a visual. Let's create a world." And "tell the neighbors I'm not sorry if I'm breaking walls down / Building your girl's second story, ripping all your floors out," I think it's such a beautiful sentiment. 'Cause it is like, for so many people, some people have my experience, where they, they know who they are from the beginning and they're hiding who they are. And then there's other people who maybe get married and then find the love of their life later on in their life and it ends up being a woman. Or they end up realizing something about themselves and their identity and it's, it's a rainbow.

Hrishikesh: Had you been in a relationship at that point?

Hayley: Yeah, but like, you know, just like toxic relationship vibes.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Hayley: (laughs) You know, I was always falling for, like, the straight girls or the unavailable girls and, but I hadn't experienced, like, real love at that time or anything. But I'd had, like, experiences.

Hrishikesh: Falling for the straight girl is a good way to get into a love triangle.

Hayley: Absolutely. Really sets yourself up for success there. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

(background vocals: "Boy")

Hayley: And then I remember, I was like, oh, the song's called "Girls Like Girls." And it'd be funny to be like, almost sarcastically being like, "boy," you know, as like I'm, talking to this guy that I'm stealing his girl from. Yeah.

(vocals + harmonies: "Boys (boy) / Boys (boy) / Always gonna steal your thunder / Watch me like a dark cloud / On the move collecting numbers / I'ma take your girl out")

Hrishikesh: Having the harmony that's going throughout. Do you remember where that idea came from or how you arrived?

Hayley: That was classic. I'll share with you, it stems from feeling insecure with my vocals. Growing up, not being the best, like, vocalist and having to learn how to sing because I was so desperate to express myself through song. And so, I would always layer my voice. I grew up listening to like Imogen Heap and you know, like the vocoder stuff she would do. And so I've just always loved, like, walls of voices.

(vocals: "Saw your face, heard your name, gotta get with you / Girls like girls like boys do, nothing new / Isn't this why we came? Gotta get with you / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new")

We mixed this song on an iHome. Do you remember an iHome? You, like the ones that were the alarm clocks by your bedside? That's what we mixed the song on.

Hrishikesh: Because those were the best speakers you had in the house?

Hayley: Yeah, well, we also didn't have money to get it, like, professionally, like, done. So James, like, mixed it on the iHome and was like, well, if it sounds good on the iHome, then it'll sound good in everyone's professional speakers.

(instrumental + vocals: "Isn't this why we came? Gotta get with you / Girls like girls, like boys do, nothing new")

Obviously, I had no idea what this song would end up being for myself. And I had no idea the foundation the song was going to lay for me in, in my future.

And then I remember wanting to make a music video for it. I was like, if I'm gonna release a song, then I need to, like, really go for it. And that's, you know, when I co-directed the music video. And released that in June 2015, a couple days later, same sex marriage was legalized in the country, which was to my surprise, and also very exciting.

So it was just this really interesting shift culturally that happened. And then the music video went from a million to 2 million to 3 million. I was playing for 15 people in Michigan in a bar and sitting in my car because there was no green room. Like that's where I was at. And because of this song, I got signed to a

major label.

Hrishikesh: And then how did all that lead to you directing this movie?

Hayley: A lot of the comments were like, "I wish this was a movie."

Hrishikesh: The comments on the music video?

Hayley: Yeah. And that kind of planted this seed. And that led to many, many years of, you know, developing the script. And at one point the movie kind of, like, fell apart. And I was like, if I die tomorrow, I need this story to be told. So I decided to write the novel of *Girls Like Girls*, and so I released the book in 2023 and that became a New York Times bestseller.

And that momentum ended up sparking the momentum back up for the film. And I got greenlit for the film at the end of 2023. Shot the movie in 2024, finished the movie in 2025, and now we're in 2026.

Hrishikesh: Now this song is 11 years old.

Hayley: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like you made your NSYNC fantasy come true?

Hayley: (chuckles) I think I have. Like, I definitely think that that dream of being able to sing music about girls and having girls, you know, scream and be excited about it, I definitely have had those moments. It's kind of really wild to think about that.

And that all started being scared that I was putting the song out on the EP. You know, it's really cool to go down this memory lane with you, knowing that I love being gay. I love who I am, and I've found love.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Girls Like Girls," by Hayley Kiyoko, in its entirety.

("Girls Like Girls" by HAYLEY KIYOKO)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You can find links to buy or stream "Girls Like Girls," and watch the music video that Hayley co-directed. The film *Girls Like Girls* is out now.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, Kathleen Smith, and Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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