

Song Exploder
Charli XCX - Camera
Episode 319

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 has some explicit language.

Charli XCX is a Grammy-winning artist who has been making music since she was a teenager. In July 2026, she released her eighth album, *Music, Fashion, Film*. It debuted at number 1 on the UK charts—her 4th album in a row to hit number 1 there. In addition to her music career, for the last few years, she's been acting in films, and for this episode, we talked about how those experiences inspired her song "Camera," and how she and producer Finn Keane figured out how to translate that into music.

("Camera" by CHARLI XCX)

(Vocals: "All I know is how it makes me feel / And it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah, it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah, it makes me feel how it makes me feel / When the camera's on")

Hrishikesh: Could you introduce yourself?

Charli: Yeah. My name is Charli XCX.

Prior to this song, I was kind of going through this thing of, "I don't really wanna make music for a while." Not in a dramatic way, but you know, I'd been making a lot of stuff.

I made *Brat*, then I made this whole kind of remix album. And I was playing a lot of shows. I was DJing a lot. I was, you know, doing all this stuff. And I think I wanted to not make music again for a while, because I wasn't sure that I had anything to say. And actually, I really wanted to explore film, which has been sort of a long-term passion of mine.

And over the past three, four years, I've actually been able to really act on that passion. I made a film called *Erupcja* in 2024. And prior to that, I'd been on set with Gregg Araki for, like, one day, and a couple of other films for one day.

And I had spent earlier in the year making a film. The film was called *The Moment*, and we shot it in five weeks. You know, really condensed, really quick. But in that five weeks, we really kind of bonded as a cast and crew. And it felt

really creatively stimulating and rich. That lack of control that sometimes you get when you walk on set as an actor, on somebody else's film, is actually, for me at least, quite freeing.

You know, like, to go on, perform. Like, you fuck up, you don't do a good take, but whatever. It makes you feel alive. There's something very, very vulnerable about that. I've spent my life, you know, since I was 14, really, making music and being very much in control of my own destiny in terms of every single, like, output about me and my artist project.

And the beginnings of this song was kind of me mourning that feeling, and thinking about that feeling of being surrounded by these incredible people whilst shooting a film. And honestly, the feeling that I got from being on camera in that kind of a way, in an acting capacity, rather than being on camera as a musician in a music video, for instance.

So I was kinda like, "I really want a creative pause from music." And then out of nowhere, inspiration struck, because thinking about those feelings was kind of the initial seed of inspiration for this song.

It started in the summer of 2025. My friend Finn Keane is a long-term collaborator of mine now, but particularly on this new album, you know, I made it sort of exclusively with him and AG Cook.

Hrishikesh: You've worked with a lot of different producers, what is it that makes you want to keep going back to the two of them specifically?

Charli: You know, the reason I go back to them is because there's no rules, you know?

I think my biggest gripe with the pop music landscape and the songwriting landscape, which I will say has kind of, like, become a little more scarce, like, this mentality that I'm about to discuss. But,

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Charli: I definitely remember in, like, 2015 in LA, it was very much this sort of, like, old school, kind of traditional mentality when it came to writing particularly pop songs. A lot of, kind of, rules of, like, "Oh, well, to make the song technically good, you have to hit the highest note in the chorus," or, "You can't repeat any of the notes in the verse, in the chorus."

All this bullshit. Like I, you know, I don't know. Like, who came up with these fucking rules? This is some bullshit. Like, I don't know. So, we've never really been interested in that. And don't get me wrong, like, I really appreciate a

well-written pop song. I really appreciate a more traditional-sounding pop song in terms of, like, melodic structure. Like, don't get me wrong, I'm into it.

But this idea of, "Oh, no, that's wrong," is something that I would come up against, actually, quite a lot. Especially when I was in LA, in that time, hopping around and, like, kind of exploring different producers. People would be like, "Oh, well, that's not right. That's not *good*." Like, "That melody isn't *good*." I'd be like, "Well, why do *you* know that? Why do you get to say that and I don't, and I'm the artist? Like, I'm never working with you again." Like, do you know what I mean?

Like, it's just... To me, a good melody is all about conviction. That's it. It doesn't matter if that melody is on the same note. If it's performed in a truly honest way, that's it. I just have to *believe* you. To me, that's what makes a good song. If I believe you inside and out. Not if it's following some, like, ABA formula or whatever, you know? It's like, there are a hundred songs that can be written like that, but if there's no conviction behind it, then it doesn't matter.

And so, Finn and AG, we all kind of believe it just has to feel honest and real, and I think that's why I go back to them, you know, because it's freeing. Because there are no boundaries or rules within the songwriting, we're able to sort of explore all of these different territories without feeling like we're doing anything wrong.

When Finn and I made the *Wuthering Heights* album together, we were working with strings a lot for the first time.

We'd been very inspired by John Cale.

Hrishikesh: John Cale from the Velvet Underground?

Charli: Yeah. We were really thinking about his quote:

(John Cale quote: "There's always this standard that was kind of set for how to be elegant, and how to be brutal.")

"Elegant and brutal," which is the two words that he used to describe the criterion for whenever he was making a Velvets record. We were kind of exploring that with *Wuthering Heights*, you know. Whenever we were recording strings, we were thinking "the strings have to be elegant and brutal."

So there weren't these kind of, like, conventional, smooth, like, gorgeous, luscious strings. They were a little scratchy, a little aggressive,

(Wuthering Heights album strings)

And I think that record and working with strings in that way sort of went on to inspire me to be like, "Okay, so like, I wanted to use a lot more guitars on this record. Maybe we should explore our version of guitars." 'Cause I'd never really done that before. Like, my previous records don't feature a lot of guitar. And so that was kind of a jump-off point.

Finn played some chords, strumming them normally on the guitar.

(original guitars)

And, you know, very sort of simple, like, kick snare rhythm.

(original guitars + drums)

And that's another thing I love about working with Finn. We kinda, like, just throw a track out real quick because we don't wanna, like, suck time out from working together. Like, we don't wanna, like, spend, like, ages perfecting the sound of a snare drum, only to be like, "Oh, actually I don't have an idea over this," or whatever.

I then sang a kind of scratch melody, with not many lyrics. Just, kinda like vague vowel sounds type thing. And we kinda sat with it for a minute, and then we were like, "Okay, this is cool, but there's something a little smooth about the way the guitar is played."

(original guitars)

I kinda knew we needed to make the production feel a lot more, like, raw and direct and rough, because that would really, kind of, reflect this very exposing feeling of being on set as an actor and it being kind of humiliating. (laughs)

And so I kind of wanted the guitar to feel less perfect and a bit more reflective of that feeling that I was trying to capture. And so we decided to cut the chord at, like, a very awkward point.

(chopped guitar)

Which then kind of made the guitar very, very chopped in this sort of intense and kind of, like, rough way.

(chopped guitar melody)

It went from being something quite pretty to something a lot more jarring and

distinct.

(more chopped guitar)

It feels very angular to me, and that is also very much the feeling that I have on set. It's, like, a little uncomfortable or something (chuckles) in a way that I like.
(laughs)

(chopped guitar and drums)

That became, like, a real, like, identity to the song that then went on to kind of help us figure out not only other production elements, but the kind of lyrical journey of the song.

(Vocals: "Makes me question what I'm doing / Do I wanna make music? / Am I being fucking stupid if I try to be a girl on the screen when I'm turning 34?")

There's this part where I say: "Am I being fucking stupid if I try and be a girl on the screen when I'm turning—" and I was like, "I cannot say 33. That would be so lame if "screen" rhymed with "three", that would be, like, just the worst decision ever." And luckily, I am turning 34, so it w- made sense for it to be that.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) But at the time it was 2025, so you were turning 33.

Charli: (laughs) Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah exactly. I had the foresight to know that this record wouldn't come out that year. Thank God. My gosh.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) What is it about rhyming that you felt so strongly against?

Charli: Well, I think because this song is very much me talking to myself about something quite embarrassing. About wanting to act, and wanting to feel free and the danger when I do so, and also knowing that some people will always say that I suck or can't do it. And no matter who you are or what you're doing, if you decide, "Oh, you know what? I'm a little older and I wanna, like, embark on this new creative journey," or not even a creative journey, it's, like, quite vulnerable to sort of put yourself out there in a world which is so hellbent on scrutinizing absolutely everything and everyone.

And so I think because it is that embarrassing inner monologue, it didn't feel right to have rhyme because, at least for me, rhyme requires a bit of premeditation. And you know, this song more so than any, we really wanted to keep that stream-of-consciousness kind of a vibe. So, to have rhyme in this song would've maybe made it feel like a thought I was going back to, rather than a spontaneous one.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. That's brilliant.

Charli: You know?

HH: Yeah. Really great answer.

More with Charli XCX, after this.

Charli: I like to write with a lot of Auto-Tune, and a lot of my songs have a lot of really heavy Auto-Tune on them. But when I did the initial vocal take for this, it was very, very, very Tuned. And there is still Tune on this track.

(Auto-Tuned vocals: "--know is how it makes me feel / And it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah, it makes me feel how it makes me feel / When the camera's on")

But actually, what we really liked was then doubling the vocal with the completely untuned vocal.

(doubled with un-Tuned vocals: "-makes me feel / And it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah it makes me feel how it makes me feel / Yeah, it makes me feel how it makes me feel")

That contrast, again, it's like that jarring thing. I think that was important to us, you know? For it to not feel super smooth. 'Cause there's definitely a version of this song that could have felt very kind of, like, smooth and sort of perfect, but that doesn't really match the feeling of what I'm singing about. So that's why we decided to not go that route.

I always feel like the mistakes are the best and most human moments, actually. And there is one of those in this song actually, right at the end of the chorus. When I say, "When the camera's on." There's this accidental, like dodgy guitar lead static.

(electric guitar static)

It was just gonna be a break, and we were like, "Oh, wait. That's actually really good and weird," and punctuates it in a way that's, like, way more interesting than like a traditional beat cut.

(chorus instrumental, cuts out with guitar static)

That was sort of like one of those mistakes that we loved.

(outro bass)

And then in the sort of outro of the song, everything becomes super minimal. And there's that bass that is plugged in and played direct with no effects pedal or anything like that, you know, to give it this sort of, like, very, like, honest presence.

I say:

(Vocals: "I can finally be totally honest. It's like I'm looking down the barrel of a gun. Fucking shoot me")

And when I said, "Fucking shoot me," I don't know where my head was at. I really was talking about, like, a gun. I wasn't thinking about the double entendre of, like, the camera. And then it was actually only, like, afterwards I was like, "Oh, wait. That's cool." But I didn't mean that. I was not being smart like that, in the moment.

I was really talking about, like, "Kill me," you know? But then after a while I was like, "Oh, it means both. Thank God. People aren't gonna think I'm being suicidal." (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: I'm curious where you're at now, with the feeling that had preceded this song, the idea that you wanted to take a break from music. Given that, you know, it's a year later and now you have this new album.

Charli: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Where are you at with the feeling that was in this song, and I guess this song itself, as a document of that feeling?

Charli: It's funny. I don't have children, but someone who has kids was telling me about this. This idea that, like, if a woman decides to have a second child, biologically, we're kinda like, trained to put the pain and stress and trauma and angst out of our mind. The literal physicality of birth or pregnancy or things like that, is like, actually we sort of forget about that when it comes to having another baby or something.

And--not that making an album is the same as, as giving birth, but maybe that's why I sort of keep forgetting that I've actually kind of, like, felt this a lot. Maybe it's just, like, my, inner, like, fucking trauma system is just being like, "No, forget

about that 'cause you're about to do it again." I don't know. But yeah. (laughs)

In terms of the song, I actually think this is a really sad, sad song.

Hrishikesh: Why is that?

Charli: Well, I think it's about running away from myself and my identity and wanting to escape into another identity where people can't find me.

It's sort of this endless quest to feel something. The more and more I live life, the harder it is to feel something from creative pursuits that happen over and over again. Music, for instance, you know? And so I think wanting to pivot is, is about that. It's about this desire to feel on a level that hasn't been felt before.

And so yeah, I think there is something sad about this song for me now. Which doesn't make me like it less. Like, I love the song and, and I stand by all of the feelings within it. But there is something a little um, heartbreaking for me about it because it's like, will I ever be able to be still and just, like, be happy with who I am?

I don't know. Jury's out. You know?

HH: And now, here's "Camera" by Charli XCX, in its entirety.

("Camera" by CHARLI XCX)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Camera," and you can watch the music video.

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