

Song Exploder
Paula Cole - I Don't Want to Wait
Episode 320

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.

Paula Cole is a singer, songwriter and producer from Massachusetts. She put out her first solo album, *Harbinger*, in 1994. Her second album, *This Fire*, came out in 1996 and was a real breakthrough. She was nominated for seven Grammys, and she won the Grammy for Best New Artist. In fact, that year she was the first woman in Grammy history to be nominated for Producer of the Year without a male collaborator. For this episode, Paula told me about how she made one of the big hits from that album: "I Don't Want To Wait." It spent 56 weeks on the Billboard charts. And then, it was heard by millions more, when it was used as the theme song for the hit TV show *Dawson's Creek*.

These days, Paula has been reclaiming her old music in various ways. A couple of years ago, she re-recorded some of her songs, including "I Don't Want to Wait." And that's the version of the song that you'll hear throughout this episode, and at the end, in its entirety. And on September 10, 2026, Paula is putting out an archival collection of her demos. It's called *Sonic Memoir: Demos 1989-1998*. It includes the original demo of "I Don't Want to Wait," which you'll also hear in the episode as Paula tells the story of how she wrote and produced the song.

("I Don't Want to Wait" by PAULA COLE)

(Vocals: "I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / Will it be yes or will it be sorry? (Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo)")

Paula: My name is Paula Cole.

So it was 1996. I had released my first album, *Harbinger*, which was well-received critically, and it was important that I follow up with something. My life is changing. I'm touring. I'm singing in coffee houses for 50 people with my own material, but that's growing. I had, like, a string of failed relationships. I was 28. So I was just in the throes of being in one's 20s in the '90s in New York City. Like, so that's a shit storm.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Paula: And, I mean, I've lived in the self-help book section. So that's the climate in which

(laughs) I wrote that song.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember what you were specifically thinking about when you started?

Paula: I was in a meditative mood. And I was in tune with the feeling that my grandfather was going to pass.

I grew up in Rockport, Massachusetts, for most of my childhood with Grandma and Grandpa down the street, and that was incredible. You learn so much about yourself through learning about your family, your history. And my formative years with my grandparents were just, just those kind of loving times with grandparents.

But you notice things. You know, the caution not to ever surprise Grandpa and, and so forth. There were just these stories that slipped out. My grandpa came home from World War II, and came home with PTSD, changed. But there was no vocabulary. There was no real understanding about what he went through or how to deal with it, so all of that PTSD just gets buried in a relationship, in a marriage, and it comes out sideways, and it comes out as abuse, and it comes in as this cyclical force that then touches generations. It touched my father, who lived with abuse, and then us, we lived with abuse.

And I'm thinking about how I don't want to repeat that. I don't... With all my heart and soul, I want to try to be conscious and look at my life. And all of that kind of coalesced in this song, precipitated by the feeling that my grandfather was gonna die. Which he did, soon after the writing of the song.

I lived on 15th Street in Chelsea of New York City. It was a townhouse apartment. I had a piano, I had a spinet piano. It's the smallest of the pianos. So it has kind of the smallest sound. But when I moved to New York from San Francisco, I was only playing digital pianos, and I missed an acoustic piano so badly.

And I bought this Wurlitzer spinet. That's the only one that would fit up the stairwell, basically. And we had it hoisted up the townhouse stairs to the second floor where my apartment was. And so many songs were born out of that acoustic piano.

(Paula riffing on the spinet piano)

Tom Waits says, like, our fingers are like old dogs, they go to the same places. And I try really hard to move my fingers to new places. But I have to say, I love the black keys.

(more riffing)

So probably my fingers were wandering around that space.

And I remember thinking about James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" and how the bassline is that gorgeous descending major scale, essentially.

("Fire and Rain" by JAMES TAYLOR)

(Vocals: "I've seen fire and I've seen rain / I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end")

And I'd noticed that in a couple other songs and just how anthemic it makes a chorus when you have that gorgeous descending major scale in the bassline.

And I was thinking about the top of a chorus, melodically. How do I want the top of a chorus to just kill, you know? I remember thinking, like Tina Turner's "What's Love Got to Do With It," that hook of, "Oh-oh-oh! What's love got to do," you know, the, the "oh-oh-oh," it's so hooky.

And I can be as arty as the next person, and I'm proud of my eccentricities, but I also really love, like, economical pop writing that, that just goes for the jugular and hooks you in. And that song's just killer, where her vocal lands. So that's like my more analytical brain kind of entering the flow space of writing.

So it's all those things, like, my hands gravitating towards the black keys; the anthemic bassline; trying to find a killer melodic opening for a chorus. And thinking about my grandfather. You know, "I Don't Want to Wait" is this, like, interesting mixture of all these vectors.

(chorus vocals: "I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / I want to know right now, what will it be? / I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / Will it be yes or will it be sorry?")

So the initial seeds were laid on my spinet piano.

And then I asked Jay Bellerose to come on over, 'cause he's such a beautiful heart, soul, and drummer. Like, oh my gosh. I started playing with Jay when I was 19, and we met at Berklee College of Music. He's one of my primary influences. I love him so dearly, and he's like my right arm musically, and musical soulmate. So I'd ask him, like, "Can you come on over? I just wanna record some demos, get the ideas down."

I had learned enough to just kind of do some basic mic setup around his drums. It was always really important to capture the air around the drums, and that's the way Jay plays, is like, you need to hear the room.

(demo drums)

We probably, like, rehearsed it once or twice, and then we hit record.

(demo piano and drums)

It's pretty loose, and it's just me and Jay in the apartment living room. We're just finding the song, and there's beauty in that freedom of the search.

(demo chorus vocals: "I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / I want to know right now, what will it be? / I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / Will it be yes or will it be sorry?")

This being the '90s and the record companies being what they were, they wanted to hear the songs in demo form before they would pick up their option for album number two and give you the budget to go into a proper studio, right, with a producer and spend all that money. So you had to make demos.

And that was the hugest pain in the ass. But now I'm really, really, really grateful for it because I learned how to self-produce, and I learned about the process and, and kind of exercised my musicianship in a more deep way. It made me think about music more creatively, more expansively. It also was amazing because now I own all the masters of those demos. And I'm releasing them, (chuckles) and they're my masters, which is awesome.

Hrishikesh: More with Paula Cole, on the making of "I Don't Want To Wait," coming up after the break.

Hrishikesh: So, after you made the demo, how did you begin the process for recording the album version of the song?

Paula: Well, I had a false start in the earlier part of 1996, and I recorded a version of *This Fire* with Kevin Killen and Gerry Leonard. Kevin Killen is a brilliant engineer, producer, and I first heard of Kevin Killen through Peter Gabriel's *So* album. I asked Kevin to produce my very first album, and Kevin Killen brought Paul Bushnell on bass, and he brought Gerry Leonard on guitar. And Gerry and I began dating, and he moved from Ireland to New York City.

And so Kevin was the producer on *Harbinger*. And it's a very different album. It's probably the most pristine out of all the recordings I've made. He's very meticulous in the studio.

Hrishikesh: And so the idea was that Kevin Killen would produce your second album as well?

Paula: Yes. And we started an incarnation, like the first incarnation of *This Fire*, my second album, but it wasn't feeling right. I didn't feel like it was coming out the way I, I wanted it to. And don't get me wrong, Kevin Killen, I've learned so much from him, and he's so brilliant.

I just wanted to make a different kind of record that was sloppier and was more raw.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Paula: So I had to go to the record company and say, "I wanna re-record it. Will you support me if I produce myself?" And they did let me, but they ... I had to record the whole album on half a budget. And so that meant my finding tape at cost, everyone getting kind of paid lower salaries probably than they deserved.

I was recording in the wee hours of the studio time. You know, after hours.

Hrishikesh: Was that painful? I mean, having had this relationship with a producer on, you know, an album that had gotten you this far, to say, "No, no, I don't wanna work with you."

Paula: Oh, it's brutal. It's so brutal. I lost my boyfriend and my producer, in that decision, 'cause they were best mates and both from Ireland. It's painful to talk about it. But...I just...you have to trust your gut.

(piano)

It allowed me the freedom of self-production, the learning. And... did it myself.

(add drums)

It was fast. Jay and I, we recorded nine tracks back to front with Roger Moutenot this time. We recorded at The Magic Shop in New York City. Roger Moutenot was, like, the perfect engineer who got it, 'cause he was doing kind of more lo-fi projects like *Yo La Tengo*, and he just was coming from the right headspace.

Because I wanted to produce it myself, and all the men that I was interviewing to, like, engineer the album, they would automatically assume that they were taking the producer role because it, that was the climate at the time. Like, "Okay, little young girl, I'll pat you on the head. Yes, I'll take, I'll take the reins now and I'll be the producer now." (chuckles)

Like, and it was so shocking to me. Like, you're not listening to my words. Like, I've asked you to come to this interview as an engineer. And then finally Roger Moutenot comes and he hears my words. And I'm still working with him to this day, because he supports a woman's voice, 'cause he's actually listening.

So we went in the studio and just played piano and drums live.

(piano and drums)

Greg Leisz flew in from LA. He recorded all of his guitars in three days.

(guitar)

And Tony Levin, on bass.

(bass)

The story of my grandmother is in verse one.

(Vocals: "She had two babies / One was six months, one was three / In the war of '44")

"She had two babies. One was six months; one was three." So that's my father: six months; and one was three: my aunt. "In the war of '44." That's setting the stage of my grandfather being in World War II and fighting in the Battle of Okinawa and so forth. And then, "Oh, would her son grow to know his father?" And that was based on a conversation I had with my grandmother. I had been carrying that around for a long time.

(Vocals: "Oh, would her son grow to know his father?")

And then, moving on to verse two.

(Vocals: "He showed up all wet / On the rainy front step / Wearing shrapnel in his skin")

That's the story my grandma told me: Grandpa came home, on a rainy day, and he showed up at the front door, probably after being in hospitals. And he had shrapnel all in his legs.

(Vocals: "And the war he saw lives inside him still / It's so hard to be gentle and warm / The years pass by, and now, he has granddaughters")

"And now he has granddaughters." So that's me.

So all of these feelings, like looking at my grandfather in a historical way, a storytelling way; how it affected me; how generational trauma just moves silently through generations subconsciously; I was realizing that I'm having a string of failed relationships. I wanna look at that. I wanna learn. I, I want a meaningful, long-lived relationship. I want a life partner. So I don't wanna keep repeating these mistakes; these unexamined cycles of misery. No.

(Vocals: "I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / I want to know right now, what will it be? / I don't want to wait for our lives to be over / Will it be yes or will it be...")

And then, the bridge.

(Vocals: "Oh, so breathe a little more deeply, my love / All we have is this very moment / And I don't wanna do what his father and his father and his father did / I wanna be here now")

Yeah, "His father and his father and his father," that lays out just how generational it is. So it's like the jaws of anger; the jaws of the past; the jaws of our shitty shit in the subconscious that rule us like ghosts. The only way is to kind of, ugh, be willing to open up that Pandora's box, look at yourself compassionately, do the work, and you start to free up, and you get a little better at your parenting, a little better in your relationship. You have more compassion for people. You have a little more space. And that's in the intro and the outro.

(Vocals: "So open up your morning light / And say a little prayer for I / You know that if we are to stay alive / Then see the love in every eye")

If humanity is gonna make it, then we must find our empathy for each other, and we must look each other in the eye and see the goodness in each other, see the peace in each other, "see the love in every eye." So that's what I mean by that.

(ostinato electric guitar)

I added a couple overdubs while we were mixing. We were mixing at Looking Glass, which I think was Philip Glass's studio. Roger Moutenot was mixing the track, and I added this little ostinato guitar part, electric guitar part, and I'm not a guitar player really, but I just added that in.

It just felt like it needed a little frosting. I said, "Wait a minute. We need to throw up a vocal microphone in the booth."

And then I added the "doo doo doo" vocals.

(background vocals: "Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo-ooh")

It's a small vocal arrangement.

(cont vocals: "Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo-ooh")

It gives it, like, something ethereal and pretty and something that people can sing along to.

(add drums & piano)

(cont vocals: "Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo / Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo-ooh")

Hrishikesh: And so, just to be clear, the stems that we're listening to right now, these are from a re-recording that you did.

Paula: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: And I was just wondering, why did you end up re-recording the song?

Paula: I suppose it was just a reclamation of my work. And I'll be honest, it was financial. I signed such a, a terrible contract.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Paula: And I hate to talk about it, in such, ugh, like, economic terms, but it is a business, and it preys upon young artists, like I was. And, you know, I'd heard about Aerosmith re-recording one of their big hits so that they own the master, and I thought that was pretty damn smart. So I did it to start reclaiming my life. And it's really, like, an empowerment move.

So this is the re-record. And when we re-recorded "I Don't Want to Wait," what you're listening to now, we are doing, like, a forensic re-record so that it sounds like the original.

My same drummer is Jay Bellerose. Kevin Barry is on the guitars here, and I've been playing with him since I was a teenager as well. Like, we all met when we were students. That's our original band, Jay, Kevin, and me.

I actually played "I Don't Want to Wait" for my father first, to kind of warn him. Because I had already been through some experiences with my family. When, when a writer writes about you, you wanna give them fair warning. It can really be hard on the people you love. So I played that song for him, and it really moved

him, and it incentivized me to add it to *This Fire*.

Hrishikesh: Did you always know that it was going to be a single?

Paula: We weren't planning on releasing it, but "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone," that was the first single. And that was like rocket fuel, and what do we follow it up with? Well, we just, we put out "I Don't Want to Wait." And it didn't chart as high, but it did really well on the Adult Alternative charts. It was number one there, and it just stayed number one for a really long time. And then it was picked up by Kevin Williamson, and then it became the theme song for *Dawson's Creek*.

Hrishikesh: And were you surprised by that?

Paula: The thing is, a lot of my songs were being requested for pilots, and the pilots would come and then they'd die. And it just wasn't a big deal. It was... The only big deal was that Kevin Williamson wanted to call me and talk to me personally about using "I Don't Want to Wait" for his series, and he loved the song, and he was a fan, and he was asking me personally. So I could tell he had a lot of reverence and intention and I really respected that.

So I said yes, and then I went about my life and I had my daughter, and I took a break from the road. And meanwhile, *Dawson's Creek*, this little show that I said yes to a pilot, then became a smash. And it became such a smash that people started forgetting who the singer was or who the artist was. They just know the song, and then they start associating it with the television show.

And so that really bothered me for, actually, many years. It really bothered me, and it depressed me. You, you can get forgotten, and meanwhile, the song just lives on and on and on. So there was this strong association, which I kind of resented. But then, like, after a while I let go of that curmudgeonly part of myself that resented it.

And meanwhile, it's like, artists are getting reamed in the music business. We need to stay alive, and this is a fantastic way to deliver our music meaningfully, through television. So there's no more judgment about it, and now it's brilliant. Now I'm so lucky. I'm grateful. I, I can't even believe it. And it just continues to go on and on in a way that is so mysterious and beautiful and profound. I'm very humbled by it. It's like the song of my life. I say that over and over. It really is the song of my life.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Don't Want to Wait," by Paula Cole, in its entirety.

(*"I Don't Want to Wait" by PAULA COLE*)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "I Don't Want to Wait," and you can watch the music video. You'll also find links to *Sonic Memoir: Demos 1989-1998*.

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.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm.

If you'd like to hear more from me, you can subscribe to my newsletter, which you can find on the Song Exploder website. You can also get a Song Exploder shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.