

Song Exploder
Leon Thomas - Mutt
Episode 307

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.

Leon Thomas is a singer, songwriter, producer, and actor. He's nominated for six Grammys at this year's Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist, Best R&B Album, and Album of the Year for *Mutt*. *Mutt* is his second album, and I talked to Leon about the title track, which was a breakout hit. He'd already won a Grammy for his work with SZA, but he reached a new level in his own career with this song and this album. I also spoke to David Phelps and Rob Gueringer, AKA D. Phelps and Freaky Rob, who produced the song.

(“Mutt” by LEON THOMAS)

(*Vocals: “She said, “Take your time, what’s the rush?” / I said, “Baby, I’m a dog, I’m a mutt” / She said, “Take your time, what’s the rush?” / I said, “Baby, I’m a dog, I’m a mutt” / I’m a dog, I’m a mutt”*)

Hrishikesh: Leading up to the day when you first started writing “Mutt,” what was going on in your life?

Leon: Right around the time when I was doing the album *Mutt*, it was a transitional period in my life. You know, I'd had records that were doing very well for other artists. Uh, there was a song that I produced for, uh, SZA called “Snooze” that was like burning up the charts. Previous to that, I was working with Drake a lot.

But at the end of the year, I was very frustrated, 'cause I felt like my first album, *Electric Dusk*, was getting some love, but it wasn't enough to really shake the building. And we had a, a new president coming in, to the label, and it was a very scary time. Because sometimes, when the person that signs you leaves the label, the next person could easily say, “All right, we’re not sure about this kid.” So this record, *Mutt*, was a, a survival instinct.

You know, I went in, top of the year. It was January 1st 2023. I decided, I said, “Okay, we’re gonna have to go in and really swing hard on something that, that works.”

Hrishikesh: It was literally New Year's Day?

D Phelps: Yeah. Literally New Year's Day.

Freaky Rob: January 1st, 2023. My name is Rob Gueringer, AKA Freaky Rob.

D Phelps: And I'm D. Phelps.

Freaky Rob: And we produced "Mutt."

Hrishikesh: How did you two first start collaborating?

Freaky Rob: Um, we met when I was 14.

D Phelps: And I would have been like 16.

Hrishikesh: And have you been making music together ever since?

Freaky Rob: Ever since. So the way we even met Leon is, my management and David's management have been on our asses about doing content. Me and D were terrible at doing content.

Hrishikesh: What do you mean by content?

Freaky Rob: Like, how you see producers on Instagram, they make the beat from scratch and then they put it up and it was like, our managers was pretty much like, "You guys need to get in on that. Like, you guys should be making videos, you should be showing some of these jams."

And so we had did a cool idea this day in particular.

(beat with drums and bass)

David was like, you know what, I'm gonna record myself playing the drums and I'm gonna put that up.

Leon: I was scrolling through Instagram and I saw a video of David playing drums and Freaky Rob playing bass. And I DM'd them.

D Phelps: And you know, it's funny, 'cause when it came out, that video didn't have that many views, but it led to him. So.

Leon: Meeting up with them was like finding lost brothers. I feel like we all listen to the same mixture of Led Zeppelin, Kendrick Lamar, Miles Davis, Pink Floyd, you know, these guys *get* me. They understand P Funk in a real way. They understand jazz, Art Tatum, John Coltrane. They get my mind when it comes to

wanting to make something that feels like something. Finding that in a collaborator is rare. And I knew we were gonna make something special. I didn't know when, but I knew we were gonna make something special.

Hrishikesh: So when you started working on, on the song "Mutt," how much had you done together at that point?

Leon: Probably about six months into, to working.

Hrishikesh: Okay. So you had a solid working relationship with them already.

Leon: Yeah, man. We would pull up, Rob had a studio he named The Playground, 'cause it was like a pretty large room. Uh, he had instruments lined in. So you, any musician could come in and pick up their axe of choice, keys, drums or whatever. And it was all lined into Logic and we could play.

Hrishikesh: So when you first started "Mutt," how did that day begin?

Leon: I walked in on a mission. Top of the year, it's up, I was energized. It was the same kind of vibe that people walk into the gym with on like January 5th or some shit.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Leon: Like, I was just like, "Well, I'm gonna do it! Six pack is on the way!" Like, you know what I'm saying? (laughs) Like, I had this energy to me that felt like, all right, we, we gotta make something special.

D Phelps: You could tell he was ready to get to something.

Freaky Rob: Talking to me and David like we're the congregation.

D Phelps: Yeah, and I just remember Leon with the sunglasses and just like, "Guys, I had an epiphany."

Leon: So, while I was on Christmas break, I watched this Elvis biopic and, you know, he had the hound dog almost like a, a totem for like, his world. And at the time, I had a, a dog and a cat. And my dog and my cat were bickering. And my cat, you know, lightly taps my, my dog on the face with her paw.

And my dog had this face like, like, like he kind of did something wrong. But it was, like, playful. And in that moment, his face, I don't know, maybe this sounds crazy, but his face looked like mine. I was kind of seeing myself in him, for the first time. And that, honestly, really hit me.

I wanted to find a way to kind of tie in all of these songs about unrequited love, about, about maybe being a player at times or, or maybe not being the right kind of partner at times.

And, and, uh, I wanted to find a way to really encompass all of that from a very vulnerable place, rather than a place of bravado. I was like, hold on. "Mutt", "hound dog", all of this. All right, we could tie this together. And I thought it would be a real fun, playful hook, you know. 'Cause my dog is a mutt. You know, he's a German Shepherd, Husky, Pitt. So he's just got a lot goin' on. And the term "mutt," immediately it just had like a ring to it. The vibe was right.

D Phelps: The one thing about him is just like, we know a dreamer when we see one and, and we're gonna empower it. And so we was just like, all right, let's get it.

Hrishikesh: So did you start with the music?

D Phelps: Well, funny enough, the music already was started.

Freaky Rob: It was started already.

D Phelps: Yeah. We just didn't know it. Basically bro kind of gave us what he was searching for sonically, and then we just started pressing play on beats and stuff, like we always do. And then, I found the session on accident, looking for another beat I was supposed to play Leon. And played the beat.

(original beat)

And then he, I tried to stop it and he was like,

Freaky Rob: He was like, that's it!

D Phelps: (laughs)

Freaky Rob: That's it. Me and David looked at each other like, what the hell? 'Cause it was so bare bones.

D Phelps: It was just kind of like an 8-bar loop.

Freaky Rob: 'Cause we used to make sketches. Like we would be at the studio so long. Either he, David would get bored, just go start some shit and I'd come back to it later. Add everything. Or I would do the same thing. We, like, literally save stuff like, "Rob, come back to this," or "David, add keys to this." And it was one of those things, and I lowkey had forgot about. I'm like, this shit is hard, you know.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Freaky Rob: And Leon was like, "Y'all want to go ahead and build this out, my brothers?"

Leon: I spent years producing for other people. Sometimes it's nice as an artist to walk into something that's started. And then if I have ideas, I'm down to go back and forth with the producer to see if we can like, take it to another place. But it can be a little exhausting if you're trying to do a hundred percent of everything. And less fun.

I like to collaborate, man. It's like a party in the studio when you're there with your boys, you know. When everybody's together and everybody's coming up with really cool ideas, the art of collaboration can really turn into a really positive thing.

Hrishikesh: So at this point, all you had for the instrumental was drums, 808, and a sample?

D Phelps: Yeah. The sample was "Silly Love Song" by Enchantment.

("Silly Love Song" by ENCHANTMENT)

(Vocals: "If I could write a silly love song...")

Rob is the reason I heard "Silly Love Song." He was cleaning up his studio one day, on a Sunday.

Freaky Rob: My studio was a wreck at the time. We had just recorded a bunch of different sessions going on that week. So the studio was in shambles. And that's my happy place. Like David knows, I'm a very old soul. I put on oldies, I'll clean up. But I didn't know, what's funny is I thought he knew what that song was.

'Cause this is like backyard barbecue, Chicago music. Like my grandmothers, my uncles, they're stepping to this. They're having a good time. They vibing. Like, this is like a part of my childhood, you know. And when I seen him go to the computer after listening to it, I was like, oh shit. He hears something.

(sample)

That's him on drums.

(add drums)

Leon: That's what got me, like, I was like, yeah.

Freaky Rob: But I know how big the song is personally.

Hrishikesh: Right.

Freaky Rob: Like, okay, well, it's Enchantment. But Leon is just like, I don't give a damn. This is a great song. Like, you know what I'm saying? But we're, like, thinking about the actual logistics, like the, the real part of it.

Hrishikesh: Right, like, you're thinking about, how do we do this without having to rely on a sample?

D Phelps: We didn't want to go down that rabbit hole, get in trouble and stuff, so we literally made it a point to try to recreate, or interpolate that whole feeling.

Hrishikesh: What is the difference between using a sample and then doing this kind of interpolation that you're talking about? What does that change?

D Phelps: Your finances. (laughs)

Freaky Rob: (laughs) Literally. You pay either way. It's just, how much. You save a little bit if you go one way opposed to the other.

D Phelps: But I do think us being able to interpolate the song actually did add a unique energy to the sonic wall.

Hrishikesh: How did you go about doing that? How did you recreate the sample?

(interpolated sample)

D Phelps: We built over the sample. So, like the bass and guitar, like, Rob knocked that out real fast. Piano. Shout out to Leon a lot too, 'cause like with the strings, he kind of took the initiative to get those things recorded.

(drums)

Leon: But at the time when I first heard the instrumental, there was no bass yet. But once again, I told you, I had this mission. I was like, we, now we need that P-Funk. And I was like, yo, Rob, if you could play a bassline, but I want it to have like that wah, like Bootsy, you know? Bootsy Collins is known for, like, you know, his use of the wah-wah pedal, and that open-closed feeling gives so much structure to the bass, and it's like really dope and vintage. You know, it's that funk.

(bass)

(add drums)

Freaky Rob: That drum and bass is a marriage that's like, you know, me and D've been playing together almost 20 years. So it's like some things, it's just a chemistry thing, you know?

Hrishikesh: The story of "Mutt" continues after this.

Hrishikesh: After you put together the bass and drums and the elements of the beat, what happened next?

Freaky Rob: I feel like after we built it, we got out the way.

D Phelps: Another person that helped with this song is Bizzy Crook. He's a great songwriter from Miami. Rapper, artist.

Leon: Shout out to my boy Bizzy Crook. 'Cause we, you know, we send each other ideas through a text thread and have been doing that for years now. So we have a text thread for, I'mma say about eight years, of just endless verses.

Freaky Rob: Paragraphs long. Like, it's crazy.

Leon: And I knew what the hook was gonna say, but I needed verses that felt fun and playful. The first verse, and I think the second verse, were constructed years ago. It just never found a home on another song.

(*Vocals: "I can't smoke on reggie, so pardon my bluntness / I see past pretty faces so I got trouble trusting / But I'll let my guard down for you / Said I'll put my guard down for you"*)

I feel like finding something potent to say that's clever and cool takes more time. But melody is the fun part. So yeah, melody was, like, that was my first mind. A lot of the stuff on this record was like my first mind, and I, I refused to overthink it.

(*Vocals: "New crib, told her, "Come through," it's time to break it in / Thirty-two like my pants size 'cause them niggas tried breaking in"*)

I really attached myself to that lyric because right around that time, I woke up in the middle of the night to my dog barking, and I mean, he barks, but he was like going at it.

So, you know, I put some shorts on just to see what's going on, and there's a grown man sitting on my couch and I'm like, hmm. All right. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: A stranger?

Leon: Absolute stranger, gang. So I'm like, what? (laughs) I don't have a weapon nearby. And I'm thinking about it and I'm saying to myself, all right, I just watched *John Wick*.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Leon: (laughs) And I did some random call, "Get em boy!" Like, like, like, like kind of my dog lit- I don't know. He, it was an energy, I guess. My boy just comes running out the, the door barking. And he's a big boy, so he's just barking, and you know, charging towards the living room. By the time my dog turned the corner, that man was outta my crib.

So it was kind of fire, (laughs) it was kind of fire that my boy Terry saved the day, man. He locked it in.

Hrishikesh: When you're writing your own songs, do you find that you think about that process differently than when you're writing for other artists?

Leon: Absolutely. I mean, I have free rein to mix genres in ways that a lot of other artists aren't open to. I can say outlandish things that I think I would feel comfortable saying on a stage and maybe other artists wouldn't be open to.

That was the reason why I started kind of stepping away from songwriting and production is because I kind of didn't like the, how safe I had to be sometimes. It became a bit constraining, especially when everybody has these imaginary formulas on what a hit sounds like. When honestly, I feel like the best music comes from being honest and I think a lot of people just kind of overthink it.

Hrishikesh: Do Rob and Dave get involved in the vocal side of things, or do you do that production on your own?

Leon: Well, the way I work is selfish on purpose. So I'll be in my headphones and I engineer myself just so I don't get any doubt in the building, (laughs) just in case I'm working through something. And so essentially all they're hearing me do is just like riffin', you know, like, they're hearing like a little bleed from the headphones.

D Phelps: We sit there patiently while he just records. (chuckles)

Leon: So I started with the verses, and then I got to the hook.

(*Vocals: "She said, "Take your time, what's the rush?" / I said, "Baby, I'm a dog, I'm a mutt"*)

It's got that silly, playful, flirty energy to it. Throughout the verse, I'm just talking about how it's hard for me to trust because people can be kind of wild, but I see something in you and I just want to speed into things. Let's just get straight to the love, you know? Let's just, fall in love and if you wanna break my heart, it's all good. I don't care. You know, it's really slick. It's the slick talk, you might say. That'll make the girl you really like laugh, but also, also who knows? (chuckles)

(*Vocals: "So you can break my heart if you want to / She said, "Take your time, what's the rush?" / I said, "Baby, I'm a dog, I'm a mutt"*)

And then Phelps, he never does this, but he was like, yo, what if you do like a call and response thing?

Freaky Rob: David told Leon we need something to connect the phrases. And I left to go get Chick-fil-A, and I came back. And the shit was like,

(*Vocals: "Ooh, ooh"*)

Ooh, ooh, ooh. I was like, whoa. Like, no, that shit is fire. And he had harmonized them, too.

(*Vocals with harmonized "ooh"s: "She said, "Take your time, what's the rush?" (ooh, ooh) / I said, "Baby, I'm a dog, I'm a mutt" / I'm a dog, I'm a mutt"*)

Leon: I used varispeed. And I, I did the falsetto part in the middle.

(*Falsetto vocals: "Ooh, ooh"*)

It's, like, intricate stuff, but then it's also, it's play, man. We, we were, we were at the Playground and I was just playing and I was trying to impress my friends and say like, yo, look.

D Phelps: His little falsetto he does at the top.

(*Vocals: "Ooh, ooh"*)

Oh my gosh.

Freaky Rob: The runs, it's crazy.

(Vocal run)

D Phelps: So sweet. It's just like those money notes. Like, those runs were so crazy to me.

(Another vocal run)

Leon: Then I went back to my home and recorded the actual vocal that's out there in the world. That was a fun experience, because I knew the vocal I put down just sounded like bourbon, (chuckles) and I wanted, I wanted it to be a little cleaner and just like really precise. I'm glad I, I took the time to rerecord.

(Vocals: *"But I'll let my guard down for you (for you) / Said I'll put my guard down for you / Said I'll be vulnerable / So you can break my heart if you want to / She said, "Take your time, what's the rush?" (Take your time, what's the rush?) / I said, "Baby, I'm a dog, I'm a mutt" / She said, "Take your time, what's the rush?" (The rush) / I said, "Baby, I'm a dog, I'm a mutt" (ooh, ooh) / I'm a dog, I'm a mutt"*)

Leon: The layers of, of this project show the vulnerability that are within a dog. I mean, I think anybody that owns a dog understands that even that vicious pit bull loves to cuddle. And I think there's a, there's a duality behind that.

Hrishikesh: When you finished the song, did you already have a feeling that this was gonna be a hit?

Leon: I knew I liked it. I would play it at my house and I could drive to it, or you know, it was the kind of song that I could enjoy. But it's tough being like a, like an alternative R&B artist, I would say. Sometimes like, it was kind of hard being an outsider in the beginning.

But around that time I did a lot of self-reflecting and a lot of dreaming. And the greatest thing about music to me is that you can bottle up an emotion and a feeling. And waking up that year, I was like, things are gonna change. I'm gonna be everything I'm capable of, and I'm gonna continue to just have fun.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Mutt," by Leon Thomas, in its entirety.

(*"Mutt" by LEON THOMAS*)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Mutt," 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.

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