

Song Exploder
Clique - The Birds Don't Sing
Episode 303

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.

Clique was formed in 1994 by two brothers: Gene Thornton Jr, aka Malice, and his younger brother Terrence Thornton, aka Pusha T. From the beginning, they've worked with producer Pharrell Williams, originally as part of the acclaimed production duo, The Neptunes. But then, there was a 16 year gap between the third Clique album, which came out in 2009, and their most recent album, Let God Sort Em Out, which came out in July 2025. This November, they were nominated for 5 Grammys, including Album of the Year. They were also nominated for Best Rap Song, for "The Birds Don't Sing." It's a song that they made after the death of both of their parents in the span of just a few months. For this episode, I asked Pusha T, Malice, and Pharrell about the making of that song, which also features contributions from John Legend and Stevie Wonder.

("The Birds Don't Sing" by CLIPSE)

(Vocals: "The birds don't sing (Yeah) / The birds don't sing, they screech in pain, pain / The birds don't sing (Oh) / The birds don't sing, they screech in pain (Oh, they screech in pain)")

Pusha T: This is Pusha T.

Malice: This is Malice, one half of Clique.

Hrishikesh: The events in this song start in November 2021. I was wondering, what was going on in your life around that time? And, Pusha, maybe I'll ask you to answer that first.

Pusha T: I was actually traveling a lot. I was, um, making music in different states, different settings. I was always leaving town.

Hrishikesh: Mmm-hmm.

Pusha T: Me and my mom had got into an argument, centered around her driving herself to dialysis, and not calling my brother. So that was an issue for me. You know, like, "Why are you driving? Like, you don't even have to drive." Gene would go to her house in the morning, before she could even get to her car. He would be outside waiting for her and be like, get in the car, I will drive you to dialysis.

My mom real, you know, tough lady. Tough. Like, if you argue with her, it's like,

she's getting the last word. She, I think she hung up on me. When I was coming back home, I said, man, I'm a go over here and act like nothing ever happened.

So, of course I did. "Hey, what's up? You look good today. What's going on?" You know, we talking or whatever. I told her my plans, which were to go to Turks for Thanksgiving and Texas the next day. She questioned me about going to Turks. "Are you sure you wanna go to Turks?" But before I left, she said to me, "Hey, I ain't gonna drive no more. Okay?" And I was like, "Okay." You know, I just brushed it off. And then she said, "But you know I can drive, right?" And I said, "Yeah, I know." And, um I left, to go pack, you know, get myself together. You know, leave. Airport, and, uh, yeah.

Malice: I went to her house and it was about 5:30 in the morning. I was picking her up, as normal, for dialysis. My sister had called me and she said, you know, she's been trying to call Ma, and that she didn't get an answer. And I was like, "Well, I'm here now, the door's open." I had just pulled up. And I went in there, and I just discovered her, just laying there.

Pusha T: When I got to the airport, my wife called me and told me that my brother had found my mom. I was on my way back home immediately, of course.

Malice: Four months later, one of my dad's best friends gave me a call and he told me that my dad didn't show up for church. When I went over there to check on my dad, I saw that his car was there. You know, I knocked on the door. I just didn't get a response. It led me to believe that something, you know, was wrong. I called to have a welfare check done.

And, uh, the paramedics, when they went inside, it looked to be a new rookie that was with them. And when he came outside, I noticed that he quickly glanced at me, but couldn't look at me. And I knew at that point, before I actually laid eyes on my dad, I knew that he was no longer with us. When I went in his place, he was laying there, very much like how my mom was laying there. It was just very surreal to revisit that scenario back-to-back like that.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Your parents lived in Virginia Beach, and I know that's where you grew up, and that's where Pharrell grew up. Did he know your parents?

Malice: Absolutely. Pharrell, I mean, we know each other's parents and neighbors and, yeah, for sure.

Pharrell: I'll never forget, like I was at my house, like sort of pacing around in the yard. I just understood that we gotta do a song. It was the right thing to do. We gotta do this.

Pusha T: It came to him and he was like, man, I gotta go in the studio tomorrow because I feel like I got this. Like, I feel like I got the song. He hears it in his head before anything.

(piano)

I was in Paris, where we had been recording the majority of the album. I just remember he played the beat.

(add synth)

You know, and just, telling me like, this is how it's supposed to be. Like, this is the openness, and this is the sound bed, to get everything you want to get off your chest.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Pusha T: That was his pitch to me for the verses. Because when you have beats like that, every line has to hit. Every line had to mean something.

Malice: The beat was what we call a talker. (chuckles) Where you can get your diction on and say the things that touch people and make 'em feel where you're coming from.

Pusha T: I couldn't dive into it, though. I needed a minute. I did feel like we have to do this. But I just wasn't ready. I had to prepare myself for that dive in, honestly.

(Pusha T's verse: "Lost in emotion, mama's youngest / Tryna navigate life without my compass / Some experience death and feel numbness / But not me, I felt it all and couldn't function")

Immediately it was about tapping into the emotion. Just the emotion of even having to write it. I wanted to speak to that from line one. You know, you need to understand that I'm lost while I'm trying to write this, I'm trying to figure this out, y'all.

And I wanted to put in perspective where I am in the family tree. You know, just imagine what the youngest, the mama's boy (chuckles) of the bunch, how tough this has to be.

(Cont. Pusha T's verse: "Seein' you that day / Tellin' you my plans but I was leavin' you that day / It was in God's hands, Ye was at Elon's waiting to get with me / On my way to Texas, that's when Virginia hit me")

To give a little bit of backstory: that day, I was meeting Kanye at Elon Musk's

house to record, (chuckles) to be honest. So I was actually on a trip to Texas when I found out. And my wife's name is Virginia.

Hrishikesh: When you have a moment like that, lyrically, where you're in the middle of this emotional story, but you still manage to juxtapose Texas—the place, and Virginia—the place, with Virginia—your wife's name, is that something that comes to you spontaneously? Or is it something that you try and work towards?

Pusha T: No. That, I mean-

Malice: I feel like you're trying to get our original recipe on how we do this thing here. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: I am, exactly. (laughs)

Pusha T: This song was definitely more on the passionate side. But there are just those magical times that come together where it just ended up being wordplay, when it's really just true.

(Cont. Pusha T's verse: "Sayin' you was tired but not ready to go / Basically was dying without lettin' me know / I loved you met Nige, hate that he won't remember you / Two things that break my heart is what Novembers do")

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me about that lyric, "Two things that break my heart is what Novembers do?"

Malice: Genius.

Pusha T: For my son not to know who his grandmother was and how she was... that is very painful to me. Because she was a nurturing, *spoiling* type of lady, and would be, for him. I think that like, is a very tough thing for me in dealing with, you know, her loss.

Hrishikesh: Gene, you said "genius" when I asked about that line from Pusha T; do you two feel like you are each other's first fans?

Malice: Oh, for sure. For me, for me, absolutely. I mean, we had a session, I had to take him outside and just tell him what I thought. And I was like, yo, you know, you're the best.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Malice: You are the best. That's how I see it.

Pusha T: You gotta understand that, you know, for me, the art of rap, I've never witnessed this, in close proximity until my, you know, seeing my brother first being a writer, understanding the art of it, the actual, you know, sitting down, pen to pad, notebook... so there's a tutorial in that, in just the beginning of it, for me.

And now, 16 years later from our last album, seeing how people gravitate to his intellect and perspective... man, this has been going on from seventh grade for him, 12, 13 years old, for him. So, of course.

Hrishikesh: How does this verse end?

Pusha T: "T follows you," which is my dad. "Now, mind you / DD calls you; Gene finds you, was that your vision? / Precision, while I'm reminiscin', it all hits different / Ma, listen."

Hrishikesh: Hm.

Pusha T: That was basically the walk down of everything that happened. When Gene tells you he pulled up at my mom's house, my sister called him. He was already in front of the house. He walks in; the door was open. Was this how she played it, wanted it, in how it was just easy? Like it was just, yeah. She just made it clean, man. But that's my mom.

I don't know, it just made me question. Like I said, the whole verse, as I'm writing it, my mind is just thinking in hindsight. Just wanted to speak to the idea of, man, did you map this out like this?

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Clipse continues after this.

Malice: Pusha finished his verse before I did. And when I first heard his verse, it just cut really, really deep. I knew that I had a job on my hands.

And then, once I had some time to just enjoy the verse and lament over the verse, mourn over the verse, then and only then could I dig in and do my thing on it.

(Malice's verse: "Your car was in the driveway, I knew you were home / By the third knock, a chill ran through my bones / The way you missed Mama, I guess I should have known / Chivalry ain't dead, you ain't let her go alone.")

And that is who my dad was. Chivalrous. You know what I'm saying? Stand up when a woman comes into the room.

(Cont. Malice's verse: "Combing through your dresser drawer, where do I begin? / Post-it-noted Bible quotes, were you preparing then?")

Everywhere, scriptures. Everywhere. Like, I don't know how many Bibles he had in his house, but he was the deacon at his church. You know, even in his car, like, you pull the visor down and a scripture falls out of it. (laughs) You know what I'm saying? And that was our conversation, every morning. Coffee and just talking about the goodness of God. That's really how we bonded.

(Cont. Malice's verse: "I can hear your voice now, I can feel your presence / Askin' 'Should I rap again?' You gave me your blessing / The way you spelled it out, there's an L in every lesson / 'Boy, you owe it to the world, let your mess become your message'")

So I asked him, the week before he passed, what did he think about me returning to rap? And he said, "I think you've been too hard on yourself, son." Just like that.

I really stand by every decision I made with my hiatus. But to hear him say that, you know, it just opened my eyes.

(Pharrell vocal loop: "Birds don't-, Birds don't-, Birds don't-, Birds don't-")

Pusha T: Pharrell had said he didn't want to sing the hook. He didn't felt like he was strong enough a singer to, to do the hook. He sang it a couple different ways and ended up saying, "Man, I'm not nailing this chorus properly."

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Pusha T: "But this is how I hear it. And when we get the right person to nail it, it's gonna be everything it needs to be."

And then, uh, he was like, "Hey, man. You know who'll do this? Like who got it? They're gonna execute?" And I was like, "Who?" He was like, "John Legend." And I was like, *man*.

(John Legend vocals: "The birds don't sing / The birds don't sing, they screech in pain")

Malice: He understood the mission.

Pusha T: Yeah. He definitely understood the mission. I could tell he understood what the song meant to us. You know, you could hear it in the vocal.

(add strings)

(Cont. John Legend vocals: "The birds don't sing / The birds don't sing, they screech in pain, pain")

Hrishikesh: Pharrell, Pusha and Malice told me that you're the one that came up with the lyrics for the hook. And I was wondering, how did those words end up being the lyrics for the song? It's a quote from Werner Herzog, right?

Pharrell: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: The director?

Pharrell: It just, it was so striking to me. It was from this movie. He was like in a jungle somewhere, and, you know, something went terribly wrong with his production or whatever. He was just so mad. He was kind of like cursing everything.

(Werner Herzog clip: "Of course, there's a lot of misery... But it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don't think they, they sing; they just screech in pain.")

And I was like, that's crazy. The audacity to say that: you're sad, so certainly everything must be sad, too. And so when we got ready to do the song, I knew that was the title.

(Vocals: "The birds don't sing, they screech in pain (don't the truth ruin it?) / Pain (Now it feels different, when they doin' it))

Pusha T: Since the beginning of time, when it was Neptunes, we used to call Pharrell the third Clipse member. You know, just because of the ad-libs, and those vocal nuances that come along within the track. It's something that people have always looked forward to.

(Pharrell ad-libs: "Don't the truth ruin it? / Now it feels different, when they doin' it. / The birds don't sing (No they don't, and they won't) / The birds don't sing, they screech in pain")

And Stevie Wonder did the keys.

(piano)

Hrishikesh: How did that happen?

Pusha T: Pharrell took a trip somewhere and Stevie Wonder was there. And he was like, man, I have this song that I would love to get you on. He gave him the whole

rundown of the song. And, man, you know, Stevie just enhanced what was there.

(piano)

And that's Stevie at the end of the song, as well, speaking.

(Stevie Wonder: "Remember those who lost their mothers and fathers / And make sure that every single moment that you have with them / You show them love")

Malice: Man, if my mom knew that we had Stevie Wonder on a song, she'd flip out.

(Cont. Stevie Wonder: "You show them love / You'll see")

Hrishikesh: One thing I'm curious about is, how did you two decide who was gonna write which verse about which parent?

Malice: I mean, we both could have interchanged. It's just, it was just how it happened. Pusha finished his verse with the uh, conversation, you know, that he had had with our mother at the time, just fresh on his mind. But I mean, we could've switched at any point.

Hrishikesh: I just wanna go back to the lyrics for the hook for a second. When you first heard Pharrell building this hook around these words, "the birds don't sing, they screech in pain," what was your reaction to that?

Pusha T: It hit me pretty hard. Because I was feeling like, damn, like, my mom was really toughing this out. You know, the whole process of dialysis, the whole process of, you know, just sickness, and getting up and doing all that she was doing. And I began to just think about how tough things had to have been for her.

And speaking about that with Pharrell, just randomly, you know, just like, man, you know, how you feeling? And, you know, just telling him about that. He called me back and was like, man, the parallel of, we think that birds are singing, but they're actually screeching in pain, like the parallel of, like, you know, watching my mom just get up and muster through things and she here and she tough, and whatever the case may be, but she may have really been toughin' it out.

Malice: I think a lot of people suffer in silence. And especially the way we grew up, it's like you just don't dump all of your hardships. Your pain and struggles are no more special than anyone else's.

Pusha T: But the idea of anything being tough for her, while I'm thinking she's just going on with her day and her daily and, you know, just being her. That idea was, uh, that broke me down. Like it, it broke me down.

(piano interlude)

Malice: So, on Thursday my dad came over to get some paperwork that I had.

So he pulls up in the driveway. He's sitting in the car, and I ran outside and I had on a white t-shirt, I remember. And it was freezing outside. I came outside. I went to his side of the door. I gave him the paperwork. I ran back up the stairs to my house. And I said, "I love you." And he said, "I love you, son." And it was that tone that I just did.

Now, we always said that I love you, but the way he said it, it rang to me. Like, it touched me, 'cause it was very endearing. And then, I'm running in the house and I close the door and I'm running up my stairs. I said to myself, I said, I didn't even see his face. Like I didn't bend down to look in the car. I just gave him the paper.

And my dad passed that weekend. That's the last thing that I heard him say. It really meant something to me. He left me with something: family is family.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Birds Don't Sing" by Clipse, in its entirety.

("The Birds Don't Sing" by CLIPSE)

Visit songexploder.net/clipse to learn more. You'll find links to buy and stream "The Birds Don't Sing," 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. Special thanks to Rob Ulsh for recording Clipse's side of our conversation.

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I write a newsletter, where I talk about the making of some of these episodes, and about music and film and generally about the creative process. You can find a link to the newsletter on the Song Exploder website. You can also get a Song Exploder shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.