

Song Exploder
Jessie Reyez - Goliath
Episode 304

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.

Jessie Reyez is a singer and songwriter originally from Toronto. She's won two of Canada's Juno awards, and she's been nominated for a Grammy. In addition to writing her own music, Jessie's been a songwriter on tracks by Calvin Harris, Dua Lipa, Sam Smith, Eminem, and many others. You're probably aware that there are songwriters and producers whose names you'll find over and over again in the credits for big hits. Jessie is one of them.

But for this episode I talked to her about her own song "Goliath." And the day that she wrote that song, she happened to be in the studio with a bunch of other songwriters and producers. So I also talked to Jordan and Stefan Johnson from the production team, Monsters & Strangerz, and Jeff Gitelman, AKA Gitty. Between the three of them, their credits also include songs by Selena Gomez, Maroon 5, Alicia Keys, Mac Miller, and again, tons more.

When a group like this gets together to write music, they don't always know if they're gonna be making a song that's gonna get recorded and released by an artist somewhere down the line, or if that song's gonna get recorded at all. But in the case of "Goliath," what came out was a song that was very personal to Jessie Reyez.

("Goliath" by JESSIE REYEZ)

(Vocals: "When I say I love you / I mean I would pull every star from the sky down / Or square up with any Goliath / Or moonwalk it through any fire / When I say I love you / I mean I ain't tryna do this life without ya / It's a bad day until I'm around ya / I was bout to give up til I found ya / When I say I love you")

Hrishikesh: Where were you on the first day that you started working on this song?

Jessie: We were at the studio at the Monsters & Strangerz' spot. It's a house that's been converted into a studio, which is great because the more I've done it, and the more I've been lucky enough to be a full-time musician, the more I've found that I have a special love for when it's like a home setup. It just feels much more intimate. And so they have a house that's been converted.

Stefan: We have a house in Sherman Oaks, California where the garage is a studio, the master bedroom's a studio, the guest bedroom's a studio, and it's kind of like our home base for work.

Jordan: My name is Jordan Johnson, Monsters & Strangerz.

Stefan: And I am Stefan Johnson, Monsters & Strangerz.

Hrishikesh: And who else was in the studio with the two of you and Jessie that day?

Stefan: We don't write with Jessie with co-writers very often. Like she, you know, is a full-fledged, she can do lyric, melody, and do the whole thing. But, um, Jeff Gitty and also, for "Goliath," LunchMoney Lewis actually happened to be there.

Jessie: So it was me and the boys.

Stefan: We were having a conversation with Jessie about some stuff that was going on in her life, and then the producer we were working with, Jeff Gitty, he pulled up a bunch of music beds.

Gitty: Hello. My name is Jeff Gitelman, AKA Gitty. The more experience I get, and the older I get in this industry, the more I just really like to be prepared. And so, with this song in particular, I had an idea that I prepped.

(original loop - Wurlitzer)

I came up with the idea on the Wurlitzer. And so I just heard like a 1, 2, 3, 4, major chord progression. And then I laid down the guitar.

(add guitar)

Hrishikesh: What's your main instrument? Do you have one?

Gitty: Well, yeah, I came up uh, as a guitar player. My first job in the business was touring with Lauryn Hill, playing guitar, in 2005.

Hrishikesh: Was this lead guitar melody part in there from the very beginning?

Gitty: Yeah. I just wanted to do something that's melodic and iconic.

Hrishikesh: Do you think you could explain why that's so important?

Gitty: So, I asked one of my OGs, Craig Kallman, one time, "What makes a hit record?" You know? And he said, "Well, listen, rule number one is, before the vocals come

in, the music's gotta sound like a hit.”

So I was like, oh shit. As a producer, I actually have a power, without the lyrics and the melody, which are so important. But I have the power, *outside* of that, to make somebody feel something. And so, yeah, I wanted to have a melody, but I didn't wanna make it too high, to where it gets in the way of the vocal.

(lead guitar melody)

The older I get, the more I want to do with less. So it's literally one take of each instrument. And onto tape. And off the bat, when I hear it back, it sounds exactly how I want it to sound, versus spending the same amount of time doing the take, and then having to spend 30 minutes, like, messing with plugins.

And so, besides the bass and the two guitars, an important element that I thought belonged was a Hammond B3 organ.

(add Hammond B3 organ)

Instead of just playing one sound, I'm constantly changing my foot pedal on the volume. I'm constantly changing the draw bars. And so, you're not listening for it. It's subconscious. But it's evolving, pretty much, throughout the whole thing.

(add trumpet)

Hrishikesh: Who's playing that trumpet?

Gitty: That is my friend Miles Julian. And so, yeah, that was in the original little loop that I played for Monsters and Jessie that day.

(full original instrumental loop)

Jessie: So, we were in the room, playing the music, And I was in there with my eyes closed.

It was my niece's birthday, and I hadn't been able to speak to her in a long time. Despite trying, I hadn't been able to speak to her. With just a difficult time with my family. Some of my family. Me and my brother and my sister-in-law have been going through it. And, by default, I haven't been able to see the kids as much as I'd like to.

Hrishikesh: Their kids?

Jessie: Yeah. Who are my favorite people. And then I got my call returned. And I got her

on the phone.

And I left the studio and I went outside. And I was trying to keep it together, and she's younger, and I started getting emotional and I was really trying to control it. 'Cause you know, adults understand those kind of tears, but kids don't. They're kind of perplexed. So I was, it was just, it was combustible. It was like, really, it was a lot. And I was trying to keep it together. We talked for a bit and then we said goodbye... and then it was waterworks.

And then I got my bearings, and then I went back inside and when I got back in the room, I shut my eyes. But I also leaned back, 'cause there was tears coming, I'm not trying to cry in a room full of people, either. So I was leaning back, the tears are going sideways. 'Cause I was just thinking about how much I love her.

Hrishikesh: Let me play the voice memo that you sent me.

(Voice memo: "When I say I love you, I mean I would pull every star from the sky down / Cross my heart, put my hand on the bible / And I would walk through any fire / Walk, walk through... Walking barefoot through the fire / When I say I love you, it means I'd pull every star from the sky down....")

It's interesting to listen to that voice memo, because, well, one, the music is slower, but also, you're going through this thing... but the guys in the background are just, they're just chatting.

Jessie: I was in the same room, but I was in another world.

Jordan: Yeah, I remember her getting emotional that day, during the process. You could see it was definitely a pure feeling that she was channeling. She just went into her, we call it her little trance state, where she'll literally stay silent for 30 minutes to an hour or two hours, and then she'll pop her head up. She'll be like, all right, I got something.

Jessie: It's funny 'cause it sounds so easy, but it's also a technique that I've worked on for over a decade.

Gitty: Her writing process is so crazy, and she doesn't write anything down and it's like almost so instant.

Hrishikesh: She doesn't write anything down?

Gitty: Oh, yeah! She doesn't write a thing down. She got that from Babyface. Well, Babyface said if it's good enough, you'll remember. And this was a long time ago, because I've been working for years, I've never seen her write stuff down. And

she instantly gets the melody and the lyrics.

Jessie: And the chorus to Goliath came out.

(Vocals: "When I say I love you / I mean I would pull every star from the sky down / Or square up with any Goliath / Or moonwalk it through any fire / When I say I love you / I ain't tryna do this life without ya / It's a bad day until I'm around ya / I was bout to give up til I found ya...")

Hrishikesh: What was right about this music to connect this experience that you'd been going through, to that feeling?

Jessie: Some chords just elicit that sort of reaction. They feel warm, they feel nostalgic, they feel like a hug. Yeah, it just feels like love. So it was like the perfect canvas.

Every lyric couldn't be more true. I just love her.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Jessie Reyez, and the story of making "Goliath," continues after this.

Stefan: When I first heard the hook, I was like, yo, this is like one of the sickest love songs. Like this could be timeless, classic. And then that's when she kind of explained that, like, she wasn't writing it as a love song, a romantic love song.

Jessie: And then once the chorus was done, I again got my bearings again, kind of got my footing and then looked at it a little bit more pragmatically and strategically and almost reminded myself that not everybody understands that sort of love unless you have kids in your life. Unless you have a relationship like that with kids where it's like pure love, you don't really understand that until you do.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Jessie: But if you don't, it's something foreign. So, I thought, what's more universal? Well, it seems like romantic love is much more universal than that kind of love. So then, the verses are deliberately more romantic.

(Vocals: "You love me like a Sunday morning / But you kiss me like a Friday night / Many blessings, the cup runneth over / Slow lovin' is a holy night / Levee broke and the water's pouring / You turned me into apple pie / No letting go babe it's you I'm holding / Holding onto til the end of time")

That lyric, "Levee broke and the water's pouring / You turned me into apple pie." So that lyric, it was originally in this song that I wrote years ago, called "French Boys." And it ended up going in the pitch folder 'cause it just didn't feel right for me at the time.

Hrishikesh: What does that mean? The pitch folder?

Jessie: Just songs that I love but that don't, like, sweaters I've made that don't fit me, but I know they're elite. So they go in the pitch folder for when artists are looking, that I know I could pitch this song for that artist or pitch this song for, for that movie, you know?

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Jessie: So it went into that pitch folder and then we ended up pitching it to Lisa from BlackPink.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Jessie: They loved it, but they asked for some revisions.

But it's so cool when moments happen like this, where a lyric can come to live, and still see the light of day, just somewhere else. It was nice that I was able to save it.

(Vocals: "Deleted every contact from my phone baby / If I'm honest I ain't tryna talk to no one but ya / Cuddled in ya arms I found my home, baby / If I'm honest I dropped every single ho for ya")

I recorded it without drums, so it's very leaned back.

Hrishikesh: In terms of the rhythm and feel of your delivery?

Jessie: Yeah. I was *hella* leaning back, 'cause there was no drums. And then the drums got added after.

(drums)

Gitty: The person playing drums on this record is Drew McKeon.

Jessie: And when the drums got added after, I talked to the guys and I was like, "Fuck, I feel like I should rerecord it."

Stefan: Jessie tried multiple times to re-sing over the drums.

Jessie: But they looked at me and they were like, “Jess, it sounds elite because it sounds, like, very floaty. It sounds right, still. Don’t second guess it. It sounds right”. And I was like, “Okay.”

(Vocals: “Deleted every contact from my phone baby / If I’m honest I ain’t tryna talk to no one but ya / Cuddled in ya arms I found my home baby / If I’m honest I dropped every single ho for ya”)

But I felt like some of the pocket was a little off. So then we manually adjusted, I don’t know, maybe three or four words in the second verse just to sit forward a bit more.

Stefan: Jessie ran me through the ringer a little bit. What we ended up doing is nudging some of the original vocals around, instead of using the new ones.

Jessie: It was just nice to be able to go in meticulous. And I loved, (claps) I just gotta sing their praises so much because, in the moments where I do feel like going into the minutiae and editing and like, to someone else, to someone that doesn’t care about it, it’s gonna feel tedious.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Jessie: But to someone who cares just as much, and someone who trusts you as much as you trust them, they’re gonna be like, “Cool, come in, I’ll make two hours today. I’ll make an hour of my time. I got sessions, but come in and we’ll do those little minor changes.” To move a, a word a millisecond to the right and a millisecond to the left. And then the left is too much. So now split the m-, the millisecond difference and now do that. And now let’s change the BPM again, and now let’s A and B them. And it’s very, very tedious—meticulous, but tedious—shit, arguably. But when you give a fuck, it matters.

And again, not everybody’s like that. Not every producer or production team is gonna be like, “Yeah, sure, come in. We got sessions today, but we’ll go in the other room and we’ll make this happen.” And they did.

Jordan: Yeah. Anything for Jessie. Watching her write songs is like watching a basketball player do 360-double-handed dunks and just, it’s just, it, it’s an incredible thing to witness. It’s really, uh, feel, um, privileged to be able to witness her process. And, and also very grateful that she lets us into the process to be able to mold things. Specifically in the pre-chorus.

Jessie: The pre, for me, was originally the post.

(Vocals: "Finders keepers losers weepers / Let the streets cry / Finders keepers losers weepers / Now you're all mine")

I recorded everything. And then I think I went to do something. And then when I came back, Stef was at the board and he was like, "Hey," he was like, "We just did a little change. Like, tell me how you feel. And it just feels so much better." And he was 100% right. They were right.

Gitty: The beautiful thing about Monsters & Strangerz is that they really understand, you know, what's the most iconic part of the record? What's the part that's the hook? What's the key? Just formatting and putting a record together and getting the best out of artists.

(Vocals: "Finders keepers, losers weepers / Let the streets cry / Finders keepers, losers weepers / Now you're all mine")

Jessie: I'm a student of this game, and I remember years ago I saw an interview that Pharrell did, and he was talking about how, in songs, there's just nothing new. There's nothing new under the sun. Everything's been written about. But the beauty and the artistry is in finding those classic, quintessential human emotions or, yeah, moments, and describing them in a different way.

Also he was like, it's really slick if you can pull on someone's nostalgia. Because there's moments that you just, you know, your inner child just holds close. He's like, it's slick if you could, if you could do that, 'cause it's gonna resonate more with someone if you were able to pull that way. I think that's so cool. So I was able to do that in that pre.

Hrishikesh: By saying, just by saying the words "Finders keepers?"

Jessie: "Finders keepers," yeah. Pulls to nostalgia already.

Jordan: When she first laid down the chorus, I think we were just in the room all kind of being like, "new shit, new shit." We'll just do that sometimes in the room. Just get her hyped up.

Gitty: And LunchMoney Lewis was like "Oh, it's that brand new Jessie, Jessie, Jessie." And he literally did it like that. And we were like, that should be the intro of the record. And he picked up the mic and he literally did that.

(Intro: "New Jessie (Jessie) (Jessie) (Jessie) (Jessie)...")

Jordan: It's so good. That moment, to me, it just started feeling like a record. I don't know.

It just felt like magic. I love, that's one of my favorite parts about the record too, just that little piece.

("(Jessie humming) / New Jessie (Jessie) (Jessie) (Jessie) (Jessie)...")

Hrishikesh: How did you feel about the song by the time you'd finished all the work for it?

Jessie: I knew the song was great the day we made it. I'm not... I'm grateful. But I knew it was great.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. How often do you feel that way?

Jessie: A lot of my quality product comes from my quantity. I'm, (chuckles) I'm lucky that I, that I'm able to do that because not all my songs are great. Some of my songs suck, but that's how I'm able to get them because I, my output is so fucking high that I can make 10, and 10 might be shit, but 11 might, is gonna be lit.

Hrishikesh: And you're not gonna get to number 11 unless you do, go through 1 through 10.

Jessie: You're not gonna get to the good songs, yeah. Until you get through the shitty ones.

Gitty: The funny thing about this one, I actually prepped this idea for a whole other artist.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Gitty: I sent it to the artist that I was prepping it for. And they, I don't think they ever replied to my text message. And so I'm just like, oh, okay. I guess they don't love it. And so I put it back into my vault.

And then, when, you know, when we're working with Jessie, I was like, ah, you know what, let me, let me go into this little chapter right here. And then that's when I, I pressed play. And right off the bat, Jessie heard it, and knew what it was, and nailed it.

Hrishikesh: Has your niece been able to hear the song? Have you had a chance to talk to her since that, that call?

Jessie: Nope.

Hrishikesh: I'm sorry.

Jessie: That's okay. It's okay. It is what it is. Nothing's perfect. I don't know if she's been

able to hear it. Hopefully she has. I just love her.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Goliath" by Jessie Reyez, in its entirety.

("Goliath" by JESSIE REYEZ)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy and stream "Goliath," 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 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. And you can find a link to that 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.