

Song Exploder
Hit-Boy and Nipsey Hussle - Racks In the Middle (feat. Roddy Ricch and Hit-Boy)
Episode 306

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.

Hit-Boy is an award-winning producer and rapper from LA. He's one of my all-time favorite producers, from "Backseat Freestyle" by Kendrick Lamar, to "Sicko Mode" by Travis Scott, to tracks he's made for Beyoncé, Nas, and the Jay-Z & Kanye album *Watch the Throne*. So I was really excited to talk to him, and when I asked him which song from his incredible catalog he wanted to talk about, I was really moved by his choice. He picked "Racks in the Middle" by Nipsey Hussle, featuring Roddy Ricch. Nipsey Hussle was a rapper and community activist from LA whose career was cut short, tragically, when he was murdered in 2019. He'd released just one album, *Victory Lap*. "Racks in the Middle" was the last song released in Nipsey's lifetime. It went platinum, and a year after his death, it won the Grammy for Best Rap Performance, in 2020. This episode features a few short clips from a video that Nipsey Hussle made for the website Genius, back in 2019. There's a link to the full video that he made in the show notes. But here in the studio, to tell the story, I spoke to Hit-Boy about how "Racks in the Middle" came together.

(*"Racks In the Middle" (feat. Roddy Ricch and Hit-Boy) by NIPSEY HUSSLE*)

(*Vocals: "And I been ridin' solo tryna rebuild / Look, I was riding 'round in the V-12 with the racks in the middle / Had to pray to almighty God they let my dog out the kennel / When you get it straight up out the mud, you can't imagine this shit / I been pullin' up in the drop tops with the baddest bitches / Young nigga been focused on my check (mhmm-hm)"*)

Hit-Boy: Yeah, yeah. I go by the name of Hit-Boy.

I'm on YouTube a lot, that's where I discover a lot of new artists and just new music and what's going on. So, uh, Roddy Ricch, he had a song called "Die Young." This is before he was signed or anything. Like, he was just like an independent artist doing his thing. And I just kept playing "Die Young" every day at the studio. I would just come in, watch the video, show it to people, just share it. And I just like, yo, this song is crazy. This kid is about to go, you know, insane in the industry.

(*"Die Young" by RODDY RICCH*)

(Vocals: “Gotta keep it on me, I don’t wanna die young / I rather be judged by twelve, than carried by six / I’m gonna post bail, just look at my wrist / Tell me, why the legends always gotta die quick?”)

Hrishikesh: What about that song spoke to you so much?

Hit-Boy: It was just raw. It was just real, authentic, you know, and that’s what I respected.

So, I had a homie uh, named Knowledge who was doing some A&R work at Atlantic. So he knew that I was a fan of Roddy. And I was working at a studio called Chalice. That’s in West Hollywood. And Knowledge told me that Roddy Ricch would be at Chalice working with Future. I didn’t know if I would meet him, but I was like, man, Roddy is over here, so let me just make a beat in that Roddy vein, just in case I get that moment where it’s like, we connect, like, you know, I could play him a beat that’s like, I know almost for certain that he’ll like.

Hrishikesh: When you’re looking for the next thing that you’re gonna work on, how do you decide who you wanna make a beat for?

Hit-Boy: Man, honestly, a lot of my hits came from me not actually making a beat for anybody. You know, it’s just like having fun with it. So I, I never even actually meant to be a producer. Like, I just was like, rapping, and the kid that I was in a group with, made the beats. Sat down at his laptop one day and I’m like, yo, this is fun.

Like, prior to I started making beats, I would play video games every day after school. And I do, I look at production like a video game. The blocks looking like Tetris. That sound communication with the visual is like, it’s a video game to me. And it still is, to this day. Just clicking these blocks, and then it’s like, I just developed into me obsessing over it.

Hrishikesh: So how did that change, like, how does that work for you when you’re, like, still trying to follow your own compass, but you also have some, an artist in mind?

Hit-Boy: So this is the thing, I really get charged up and I’m able to crank out a lot of beats when I know I have a specific artist coming. Like if I know they’re coming to see me, that puts a battery in my back. Like, it’s just more inspiration when you know, like, oh, Jay-Z want me to come through. Kanye want me to come through. Beyoncé, whatever.

You know, I knew Roddy Ricch was across the way, so I’m like, let me make something that kind of feels like, like a progression of what “Die Young” is. You know what I mean? I was such a fan of that song, and a fan of him off of that song. I’m like, I would like to make something with him that I feel like could fit in

that world.

Hrishikesh: And so when you have that idea in mind, where did you start?

Hit-Boy: So I started with - shout to my boy Corbett. I produced a lot of stuff with him.

And he gave me that main choir that pretty much goes through the whole song.

(choir loop)

And it was at, like, a different pitch and a different tempo. I just took it, finessed it, you know, looped that up and then just built off of that.

Hrishikesh: How did that original sound from Corbett come to you?

Hit-Boy: Corbett just sends me packs, hundreds of sounds, folders. That's like, I'll just wake up to a WeTransfer. Just a bunch of sounds and, you know, I'll just kind of load them up. And as I'm cooking, sometimes I'll try to drop stuff in and see how I could finesse the music into what I'm doing. And uh, that was just a loop that I had and when I just felt that initial feeling, it's like, the harmonies, the blend, how he did it, the reverb on it. Like, everything just felt haunting, West Coast, but it just felt good at the same time. Then Corbett actually came and added some more, like this little pluck, key synth thing.

(synth)

Then my boy, uh, G Dav came in and did the bass line.

(drums and bass)

We programmed the drums together, it was kind of like a co-production in a real way. You hear the bounce on the drums, it's like all them sounds is like a factory and everything's just working together beautifully.

The counter lead, like, got that wobbly sound to it, kind of pitchy.

(counter lead synth)

That's like, a synth outta Omnisphere, keep the momentum up and keep the melody moving.

Hrishikesh: What was your intention, what are you hoping to bring out with sounds like that?

Hit-Boy: Just what sounds like it's still in pocket, but just sounds weird as possible. You

know what I mean? Just like, let's just keep taking it to outer space.

(full instrumental loop, ending with “Hit-Boy” tag)

Hrishikesh: One of the first things that we hear in the song is your “Hit-Boy” producer tag. I was just wondering if you could tell me more about that, like how did that come about?

Hit-Boy: I had that tag maybe since like 2018.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Hit-Boy: I was using my tag a lot at that time, 'cause I felt like I had spent so much time before that, prior years to this song coming out and prior years to where I was at, at that time in life, I was just like, giving away a lot of beats, basically made nothing off those beats. And so, man. I was like, yo, I missed all them years when I coulda had my tag on big beats, you know?

Hrishikesh: That's so interesting. I mean like, 'cause I'm somebody who always looks at the liner notes, so I always, all my favorite songs, I know who produced. So it's never occurred to me to think that you've missed out on anything by not having a tag.

Hit-Boy: Yeah, 'cause that's where the game went. You know, “Mike Will made it.”

(“Mike Will made it” tag)

Or “DJ Mustard,” “Metro Boomin’.” They all, like, started getting invited to festivals to DJ because they had songs on the radio that had they tags on it. They started getting extra money, cause they had their branding more out there and it's like, damn, I feel like I had missed that window. ‘Cause I used to be like, imagine if “Niggas In Paris” had “Hit-Boy” in the beginning. I probably, I don't even know where my life would be right now. You know what I mean?

So a whole day goes by. It's maybe 12AM, 1AM, something like that. It's late. And uh, my boy Knowledge come knock at my door. He's like, “Yo, Roddy wanna say what up. He 'bout to head out, but he just want to, you know, meet you.” So he came in my room, just said, “What's up?” You know, I told him I was a fan and respected what he was doing and, you know, seeing his movement going crazy.

And, um, before he dipped, he had his backpack on and everything. It was literally like the peace out moment. I was like, “Let me play you this beat.”

(instrumental beat)

He was like, man let me try something to it. Load it up. Did the hook.

Hrishikesh: The same day?

Hit-Boy: Right there on the spot.

(*Vocals: "I was riding 'round in the V-12 with the racks in the middle / Had to pray to almighty God they let my dog out the kennel / When you get it straight up out the mud, you can't imagine this shit / I been pullin' up in the drop tops with the baddest bitches / Young nigga been focused on my check (mhmm-hm) / Got a new coupe wrapped around my neck (mhmm-hm) / Tryna put the water on my Patek (mhmm-hm) / I got killers to the left of me (mhmm-hm)"*)

Hrishikesh: How did that feel in that moment, to have the artist come in and record something great right away?

Hit-Boy: Following my intuition has, like, led to most of my success. And that one was the jackpot, you know? So, he laid the hook. He did a whole verse to it, actually.

The next day, I'm playing the song. Everybody's going crazy. My whole team, we like, yo. I was thinking about putting out a producer album. Kind of like a Khaled-esque lane, just creating collaborations. So I was like, this could be Hit-Boy featuring Roddy Ricch. And let's possibly get somebody else on it. I was thinking about, like, who it could be. Thought about Nipsey. And it just so happened that Nipsey wanted to get in with me anyway.

It had been a while since me and Nip connected, 'cause we worked on other songs. I worked on *Mailbox Money*. I did a song with him and Rick Ross called "A Hunnit a Show." And uh, we always had a rapport, had a respect for each other. He had rapped in one of my songs called "Alert," back in like 2013.

And I'm like, man, I gotta take advantage of this relationship, man. I gotta get this dude a real banger, a real hit, you know?

Hrishikesh: Do you remember how you two first connected, the very first time?

Hit-Boy: It was a song called "Thuggin." I think this might have been 2008, 2009, something like that. But yeah, once we reconnected, I'm like, yo, man, I, I was just, had a point to prove at that point, just for myself. Like, I just wanted to make as many bangers as possible for all the artists that wanted to work with me.

So we linked up. I played Nipsey "Racks In The Middle." He was like, "Yo, run that back." I played it for him again. He was like, "Bro, I need this song for my next album, post-Victory Lap." 'Cause he was working on that for years. Like, that was his only album. And, um, he was like, "This song "Racks In The Middle" can

help me usher in my new wave. My next moment leading up to the new album.” You know? So, um I just, you know, on the spot, I’m like, cool, let’s do it.

HRISHIKESH: The story of “Racks in the Middle” continues after this.

HIT-BOY: Nipsey and Roddy was already cool, you know what I mean, so they had respect for each other. Everything just made sense.

HRISHIKESH: Here’s Nipsey Hussle talking about when he first heard what Hit-Boy and Roddy Ricch had made.

NIPSEY: Just the way it dropped. It sound new, but it was banging.

(Roddy Ricch vocals: “I got killers to the left of me (mhmm-hm)”)

Then when I heard what he was saying, I had a song in my head for it already. I know that story he telling and, you know, the place he represent. I know about that place. So I understand it.

HIT-BOY: So he muted Roddy’s verse. And he kept the Roddy hook. And he ended up putting three verses on it.

(Verse vocals: “We was lurking on ‘em, ain’t show no mercy on ‘em / We was goin’ back to back, we put a curfew on ‘em / It was dark clouds on us, but that was perfect for us / We know you always crash and burn, but it was working for us”)

Nipsey was one of the realest guys I ever met. Just very authentic, very gangster.

(Cont. vocals: “Hold up, let the beat build / See me in the streets still / I been fightin’ battles up a steep hill”)

He did express to me that he wanted people to know, like, he’s more than a rapper. Like he’s a great songwriter. You know, and that’s the people I connect with the most. You know, some people can rap, they can go on the radio and freestyle for 20, 30 minutes and it could be amazing. But you put ‘em in the studio, they can’t make a interesting song, they can’t pick the right beat, whatever it may be.

Man, I feel like you gotta have some producer in you, man. Like, you gotta be

able to pick the right beat, the right pocket, the right tempo. Understand melody. It's not just about like, let me just get on here and say the dopest punchlines. And you know, that does work for some people. It could work. But to have a song with replay value that you wanna start over, soon as it ends, like it gotta be something that catches your ear from the time it comes on, till it goes off.

And some people just like, you know, don't know how to do that.

(*Vocals: "Under no condition would you ever catch me slippin' / Motorcaded shooters plus the Maybach chauffeur driven / If they catch me wit' it, they'll send me off to prison / Judge ain't sympathizin', court don't show forgiveness"*)

Hrishikesh: As Nipsey was recording his parts, what were you thinking about while you were listening? Were you thinking about, like, his vocal delivery, or the music? What were you focused on?

Hit-Boy: Like how to elevate the production to where the song is going. You know what I mean? It was a lot of post-production, especially towards, once the song starts to progress.

(*guitar riff with reverse guitar transition*)

I love that little transition, that little reverse guitar.

(*reverse guitar*)

Hrishikesh: And I love the part in the verse when the drums change.

(*filtered drums*)

Hit-Boy: The drums are there, but they're filtered. And just like what he was saying on that part, I just wanted people to hear him, you know what I mean? Instead of being distracted by what the hi hats or the drums are doing.

It's just like, take the highs out of the whole drum track and just let his voice be the main cadence for that part, when he talked about his friend Fatts dying.

(*Vocals: "Damn, I wish my ni**a Fatts was here / How you die 30-somethin' after banging all them years?"*)

He was in my studio, hoodie wrapped up, tied up around his head. He had tears coming down his face as he was writing the verse.

Nipsey: Fatts, you know, that's one of my best friends. One of the people that really

believed that we could do something else besides gang bang. I feel terrible that I can't, I'm the one that just get to feel it. Fatts don't get to feel it.

(*Vocals: "Grammy nominated, in the sauna sheddin' tears / All this money, power, fame and I can't make you reappear / But I don't wipe 'em though / We just embrace the only life we know"*)

I was really emotional rapping them lyrics. That's why I said "but I don't wipe 'em though." 'Cause that shit was running down my face as I'm rapping. I'm in the studio with Hit-Boy. I felt embarrassed to be tearful in front of people. But then I reassured myself, 'cause that's really from the heart, you know what I'm saying?

Hit-Boy: That moment, just like when I think about it, I get the chills. It's like, him losing his life not long after talking about his friend losing his life. Unbelievable, man. Man, I definitely go back into that time, and I see everything: The mixing session, the, the recording session, and him with the hoodie wrapped around his head, him asleep in the car... I feel everything.

Hrishikesh: How long were you two working on the song together, and how long did it take for it to come out?

Hit-Boy: This wasn't just made in a day, It was maybe like a eight day process of, like, him, like coming, starting the first verse, didn't finish it, boom. Come back the next day, tell me he gonna come back the third day, don't show up. The fourth day, he doesn't tell me he's coming, then he shows up. It was just a process of us really churning this song out and just taking our time and like, you know, he took his time to really put those three verses together masterfully.

We dropped the artwork for this song right after the Grammys. So he was nominated for *Victory Lap* at the Grammys, and he lost to Cardi B. And then the song I was a part of that year, uh, "Sicko Mode" was nominated and that did not win either.

And so basically, somehow we like both leaving the venue, Staples Center, boom, we meet up. He right here, I'm right here. It's like, damn, that's crazy. He like, "Man, let's, let's drop this artwork and we're gonna drop the song like tomorrow or a couple days," whatever it was, and let's go crazy.

Nipsey: I knew that the record was going to be powerful.

Hit-Boy: And so, I think we put this song out, first week of February, something like that. Not much time went by after that song dropped. And he was murdered.

(*News clip: "A lot of hearts are heavy today because Grammy-nominated hip-hop artist Nipsey Hussle was fatally shot yesterday outside of his clothing store..."*)

Flash forward the next year at the Grammys. We win, but he's not there.

So, it's like... super bittersweet.

(*Vocals: "Mhmm-hm, mhmm-hm"*)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Racks In the Middle," by Nipsey Hussle, featuring Hit-Boy and Roddy Ricch, in its entirety.

(*"Racks In the Middle" (feat. Roddy Ricch and Hit-Boy) by NIPSEY HUSSLE*)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Racks In the Middle," and you can watch the music video. There's also the video that I mentioned earlier, from Genius, where Nipsey Hussle breaks down the lyrics of "Racks In the Middle."

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 Alon Zeckeri for his help with this episode.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.