

BUT HER LYRICS... EPISODE 001

SHOW NOTES:

The first official episode of the show tackles "Aqua Tofana," the first song off War On Women's album 'Wonderful Hell.' Shawna interviews British historian Mike Dash on the legend that inspired the song, explains how the rest of the song came together, and chats with each band member to hear their thoughts.

OFFICIAL SPONSOR: First Defense Krav Maga in Herndon, VA.

<https://www.firstdefensekravmaga.com/>

LINKS:

<https://mikedashhistory.com/2015/04/06/aqua-tofana-slow-poisoning-and-husband-killing-in-17th-century-italy/>

<https://www.thehotline.org/>

<https://www.ihollaback.org/bystander-resources/>

Shawnapotter.com

<https://www.patreon.com/shawnapotter>

<https://www.akpress.org/making-spaces-safer-book.html>

<https://www.orcinypress.com/producto/como-crear-espacios-mas-seguros/>

<https://www.b9store.com/waronwomen>

<https://shirtkiller.com/collections/waronwomen>

<https://lhpmerch.com/artists/war-on-women/>

Bigcrunchamprepair.com

'Capture the Flag' album workbook: <https://bridge9.bandcamp.com/album/capture-the-flag>

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT:

[Music]

Shawna: Welcome to But Her Lyrics, the show where we take a deep dive on the meaning and the politics behind each song from the new War On Women album wonderful help. I'm Shawna Potter, singer and lyricist for War On Women, and your host. This episode, the first real episode, we're tackling the album opener Aqua Tofana. Now, I say real episode because I did release an optional episode zero that sets up the entire season of the show. So, check that out if you wanna hear all my disclaimers and caveats and a fun interview with my mom who kind of called me out on being old in the interview which I didn't really get until after the episode aired. Did anyone else catch that? Mom, if you're listening, back at ya. Every show will be a little different as I figure out what I'm doing. But in general, first, I'll talk about the lyrics. Then check in with any band members, then I'll play any potential interviews with activists or experts on the topic, and then finish out by answering Patreon questions reading the credits, and then finally playing the song in question. So, let's not waste any time. Let's talk about Aqua Tofana, the first song on the new War On Women album, Wonderful Hell released October 30th, 2020 on Bridge 9 Records.

Okay, so Aqua Tofana literally means Tofana water. And it refers to a poison made in early 17th century Italy by Giulia Tofana. I'm confident I'm not pronouncing her first name right. But she made it for the purpose of helping women kill their husbands to get out of marriages they could not otherwise escape. I believe I came across this little historical nugget in some article from

Bitch or Bust magazine. But, y'all, I tried to find this magical mention. And I just couldn't. I searched online, I searched all my physical copies, all my magazines, and I just couldn't find where it was mentioned. So, I would love it if there's any listener out there that knows what article I'm talking about. It should be from the year 2019. Please let me know. I would love to give the author a shout out on Twitter and thank them for helping to inspire this song.

So, I look at this song lyrically as coming from three different places, right? Like three different ideas. The first, my interest in Aqua Tofana. The second is just a thought experiment about what would happen if all men died. The third idea is just me really wanting to rip off the Shellac song Prayer to God. [laughs] It was not my intention to throw these ideas together actually. But after struggling to write a song solely about Italy in the 1600s, hello, I'm not a historian, and sort of hitting a wall when it came to deciding on the point of view I wanted to express about this global coordinated effort to kill roughly half the population, eventually I'm flipping around in my lyric book and see that these two separate pages of scribbled notes might share something. They might be able to work together.

Since this is the first episode, it's the first official time I will prove that just because something interests me enough to write a song about it, it doesn't mean I'm an expert. So instead of me reading to you the Wikipedia page about Aqua Tofana, I interviewed Mike Dash, a journalist, author, and historian whose website-- A Blast from the Past-- specializes in long form essays where his original research helps explore lesser known moments in history. And he's got a great one on Aqua Tofana. And luckily for us, he took some time out of his day to chat with me about it.

[Music]

Shawna: Mike, thank you so much for joining me for But Her Lyrics. Could you introduce yourself to everybody?

Mike: Yes, my name is Mike Dash. I'm a British historian. My main focus as a writer is on strange unusual marginal events and strange unusual and marginal people.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: What did you think when a random feminist punk band from America reached out to you about doing an interview about Aqua Tofana?

Mike: I was very excited. Or not so excited as my daughter's boyfriend who actually listens to some of your music and was extremely impressed that you'd even heard of me, though I should be--

Shawna: Oh.

Mike: --I should be very much sort of honored by all of this.

Shawna: Oh. So, your daughter's boyfriend is super cool then I assume if he listens to us, right?

Mike: I hadn't realized quite how cool until now, but yeah. Exactly.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: Yeah. So, I found you online just searching for people that had written about Aqua Tofana. The original source for me discovering this little moment in history, I have no idea where I read it. And it was a couple years ago, and I have no notes. And so I thought, "Well, instead of me reading off the Wikipedia page about it to my podcast listeners, why don't I interview someone that actually knows what they're talking about?" And I found you, and I found your site. And you write about so many cool little moments in history that I think could easily be forgotten. And I wondered if the story of Aqua Tofana is a popular one. Has it seen an uptick in interest recently?

Mike: It is one of my more popular ones out there which is surprising cuz it's one of my longer ones. It took me an awfully long time to disentangle the whole story. It's been surrounded by so much room and just sort of incorrect accounts so that the whole story was something like 15,000 words which online particularly is a lot to ask people to tear through. But over the last four or five years since I wrote it, it has definitely been amongst the top six or seven most popular things I've ever written--

Shawna: Yeah.

Mike: --which is picking I find because it's definitely not one of the better known ones even amongst my not very well known bits of history. It's relatively obscure.

Shawna: So, let's dig in. What can you tell us about, well, actually set the stage for us. What can you tell us about Italy at that time?

Mike: Well, we're talking Italy in the 17th century. This is before unification, so it's a patchwork of different territories. Sicily, which is where the story begins, was part of the Spanish Empire at that point and was ruled by a Spanish governor. And Rome where the story ends was part of what we call the Papal States. So the pope at that time had a sort of a temporal role as well as a spiritual one. He ruled over a large part of territories in the center of Italy, and the church was therefore the sort of temple governing parent around the justice system in Rome as well. So, it's an area which is kind of made for criminal elements because it's from one jurisdiction to another relatively effectively and relatively easily. And this is what some of the people involved in the story actually managed to do.

Shawna: And I assume that things were not great for women at the time.

Mike: As a historian I can confirm that things have never been great for women pretty much.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: You heard it here first, people. It's official. There's a reason for our band to exist.
[laughs]

Mike: [unintelligible 00:07:31.05] but they already know. Yeah. Yeah, we're talking about a very heavily Catholic society to begin with. We're talking about one in which also I mean women are essentially as they had always been chattels and they're possessions of men. You're a possession of your father until you get married, hence the whole idea of giving the bride away by walking down the aisle. It was meant quite literally in that period.

Shawna: Mmm.

Mike: And then you become the possession of your husband. Now, that's not to say that every husband treated his wife as a child. Sometimes the relationship could work out quite well and the couple could be happy, but that was happenstance. The system is set up essentially. So, if the man chooses, he can treat the woman as a servant, as a possession. And she has a relatively limited palette of options if she's not happy with him. And that I think is really where the story begins.

Shawna: Yeah, so tell us a little bit about what Aqua Tofana is.

Mike: Aqua Tofana is supposedly, I need to be careful about this because there's some mysteries about supposedly a poison. It's supposedly a very special sort of poison. It's what's known as a slow poison. Now a slow poison differs from an ordinary poison in that supposedly it works in a slow and undetectable way. It's not as violent as normal poisons. The chief poison used at this time was arsenic, which is relatively easy to get hold of but has very distinct symptoms. It causes uncontrollable vomiting, stomach pains, nausea, extreme dehydration, and so on.

The slow poisons, in contrast, were supposedly sort of tools of deceit, tools of the weaker parties. And hence obviously as poisons more generally are tools of women, that's how they were seen by the societies of the day. And the idea was that a slow poison was a very highly concentrated sort of poison which worked in very small doses but over a longer period of time and with much less violent effects. So, in fact what would happen is that you could, if you could get hold of one of these poisons in fear, you could use it to kill an unwanted member of your family or husband for example without being detected. That was supposed to be the special secret thing about Aqua Tofana. You could murder someone and get away with it.

Shawna: And was this a unique recipe for poison, or was the uniqueness in the story behind the presentation?

Mike: Well, [laughs] this is why I say supposedly. Because, yeah, it was very widely believed in the 17th century and up until the 19th century that the slow poisons existed. The fact is that even now with our much more advanced chemical knowledge, we have no way concocting a poison that works. Well, Aqua Tofana is supposed to work. The most special thing about all of it

is that you could supposedly calculate the dose so finely, you could kill someone exactly when you want them to die a week-end, a month-end, a year-end. And that's simply not possible using poisons that we know of today. So unless you choose to believe the group of poorly educated wise women with no access to modern chemical knowledge who could somehow come across a secret that we don't know about, we have to assume that there's a certain amount of legend involved in it all.

Shawna [00:10:45.11]: So many of my lyrics for the song are taken from the Wikipedia page like it, right? I'm not above copying and pasting when it comes to lyrics and inspiration. But something that struck me about this story was, and let's just put the supposedly caveat on the entire interview. How about that? From now on like it's understood, it's also posted. Okay. What struck me was how long she was able to sell this poison undetected without being caught. Why do you think that's possible?

Mike: Well, the story is that it's a sort of family business to begin with. The poison was supposedly invented in the 1620s by a woman called Giulia Tofana who was a Sicilian, and she was executed for murdering by poison in 1633. That's definitely true. Supposedly, I guess I should have said that. But her daughter--

[Shawna laughs]

Mike: --a woman who claimed to be her daughter who was identified as her daughter who turned up in Rome 20 or so years later using the same recipe and with a network of helpers who were selling amongst other things this poison to unhappy wives in Rome. So we're talking about a poison that was certainly in use for aroundabout 30 years. And, yeah, the reason why they weren't caught was partly caution partly because the people who were buying the poison from them had obviously every reason to want to conceal what they're doing and partly because of the nature of the sold poison itself which if used properly was supposed to prevent detection. In the sense the better question is why were they actually eventually convicted or arrested rather than how they were able to operate such a long period of time. Because we're talking about a period in which there's really very limited medical knowledge that the main treatment for the sort of symptoms I was discussing here earlier on is just bleeding people, make it worse rather than better usually.

And also we're talking about a period in which bubonic plague is fairly rife in places like that. And in fact the main outbreak of poisons that we know about because they lead to trials and lead to executions in the end of the 1650s coincided with a serious outbreak of plague. And that's one of the reasons why they were supposed to be able to get away with it at the time that the deaths were being written off as being caused by something else.

Shawna: Mhm. In your opinion, do you think that most victims of this poison maybe not deserved to die but deserved some sort of accountability or justice that just wasn't going to come any other way?

Mike: Well, there's some truth in that. And it's very hard to know because obviously we're talking about trial transcripts where the people who are on trial for their lives have every reason to lie, where the authorities have every reason to want to extirpate women who are doing away with their husbands in ways that are not just illegal from the technical point of view but also highly sinful as well. And we are talking about the Papal States again. So, the evidence itself is not going to be very reliable. But, certainly there were plenty of cases testimonies given in court of women who were being beaten by their husbands, maltreated by their husbands, and had been driven to extremes of desperation essentially by the way in which their husbands are treating them and by the fact that they had no recourse other than to wait for their husband to die. And if that wasn't going to happen through their own hand, that would have to wait till that happened naturally which might be quite soon in a place like Rome in the 1650s at the pope.

[Shawna laughs]

Mike: But it was actually not guaranteed to be very soon, and so certainly the testimony that was given in court was of largely desperate wives who were really being terribly badly treated and were looking for a recourse and were sufficiently desperate for that recourse to be murder.

Shawna: Does the legend of Aqua Tofana, do you see it having any effects long term effects in Italy after the original time period?

Mike: Well, it has long term effects more generally because it became a well-known byword for a weapon that women could use to bring down the stronger sex. And this is how we see it written about most commonly in the 19th century. And the words that were associated with the sort of women who aren't supposed to be using it are very telling. They're called the deers, they're labeled as evil, they're labeled as people who have been surreptitious using women's wiles to bring down men who should not have been vulnerable to a woman.

[Shawna laughs]

Mike: So, absolutely, this becomes quite a major trope if you like in the way in which women who are attempting to escape from bad marriages or husbands are normally labeled and viewed actually.

Shawna: And is there anything else you find fascinating about this time period or about Giulia Tofana herself? Am I saying that right, Giulia Tofana?

Mike: Yes, my child would. But I'd say she's pretty better than how most people sound. A lot brilliant. But I think that's right.

Shawna: Phew.

Mike: Well, I think that the thing that interested me most when I really investigated the story is that this is really the tip of the iceberg in the sense of what emerges very clearly is that in most Catholic capital cities in this period there was quite extensive what's called a criminal magical

underworld in operation. And I find that particularly interesting because this entire criminal magical underworld is essentially devoted to servicing the needs of a female clientele who don't normally have access to power, so it's not only poisons you can buy. You can buy love filters that will cause men to fall in love with you. You can have access to the need for an abortion for example which again was impossible to get anywhere else and highly highly illegal at the time. And all of this comes through the sacerdotal power of the church. And so the fascinating thing about it it's not, in fact, devil worship or anything like that. You're using sort of renegade priests who are willing to sell bottles of holy water, things that have been blessed in churches and so on and can then be used in magical performances, which were very widely available to women in places like Paris and Rome. And the way in which people normally got access to Aqua Tofana actually it wasn't you just woke up out of the blues saying you wanted to poison your husband. That'd be highly dangerous to you and the person that is selling honestly.

[Shawna laughs]

Mike: Normally, it was a much more gradual process. You'd meet one of these wise women who actually had access to a point by something as simple as going to have your fortune told or looking for a love potion. And as they got to know you, they become aware that you are somebody who might need some of these other services that they are offering. And they will then surreptitiously offer those services to people who they trusted. So the criminal magical underworld is a fascinating discovery, and it seems to be much much more widespread than we realize. I found one in Rome by researching Aqua Tofana. Other historians have certainly found similar things operating other capitals like Paris, and I think it would be a really interesting exercise actually for historians to go and search for other criminal magical underworlds in other Catholic cities in this period.

Shawna: Now, did you listen to the song? Did you read the lyrics? I'm not saying to like it, I'm just saying if you listened to it.

Mike: I haven't listened to the song.

Shawna: Okay.

Mike: I did read the lyrics. Absolutely.

Shawna: Okay, is there anything that struck you or anything I got totally wrong or?

Mike: So I be lacking in historical nuance.

[Mike and Shawna laugh]

Mike: But, I'm not trying to either make a song that will sort of get this across the audience. I think that the thing that struck me about it was the anger. It was something that probably is meant to come across to the audience. And, yeah, this is perhaps something where you do have something over us mere historians in that we don't have access to the emotions of these cases

nearly as well as we would like to have. The trial testimonies are very flat and very much matter of fact. People are concealing the emotions that they felt I think very largely because they're potentially wholly incriminating. So I think that the most interesting thing about coming at this from a more artistic point of view is you probably have access to sort of truths that historians don't have access to. And I think that that comes across very strongly from the loops that you had.

Shawna: Mhm. Thank you for that. Is there anything you're working on right now, that you'd like to share with us? Anything coming up?

[Mike laughs]

Mike: I have seen a movie. If it pollutes your group, I don't know. My main study at the moment which I'm just finishing off in the Christmas period looks at sin eating which is supposedly again a custom that prevailed in Wales to where I come from, and involved, sort of reprobate tramps essentially who were shunned by the community being called in at the moment of someone's death. They were these people who were sort of again very similar actually to the people with criminal magical underworld. They were specialists in a certain sort of area, and what they specialized in is removing the sense from dead people so that they could go to heaven. Seems to be in a sort of remnant of Catholic ritual yet involving purgatory which of course had been abolished with the Reformation in Britain. And so the sin eaters would be called in. They would put a piece of bread and some salt on the chest of the deceased cadaver which will be laid out in the main room of the house. And they would utter a sort of special prayer, eat the food, drink or draft a veil. And in doing so, they would free their soul to go to heaven but take on all of the sins of the person who had died on themselves.

And obviously, yeah, they'd done that for a few years. They were in a fairly poor spiritual state themselves, hence the shunning of the local community. So this is again a story which might or might not have been quite as prominent as someone who said I've been investigating for a few years, and I've finally sort of got to the point of being polite at some conclusions And you can find a song in that. I'll direct you to the story of it please next month.

Shawna [00:20:36.17]: Well, I've seen that movie with Heath Ledger. So--

Mike: Okay. Okay, well, there you have it.

Shawna: --I don't know how accurate that thing is. [laughs]

Mike: Very inaccurate, but it's a story that's more interesting in many cases than the truth of it is.

Shawna: Yeah. Because I've seen that movie senator is a familiar term to me, and I actually use it sometimes in my life like as if a real term. I'm sure I won't include this in the podcast, but I sort of twisted it. And so I use it in the sense that if I see someone who is being harassed or mistreated and I need to step in as a bystander even though I might then be harassed or

mistreated right, I'd get that anger directed at me instead. When I willingly put myself in that position, I sort of think of myself as like, "I'll be the senator. I'll take it on. I'm in the mood for it. Come at me, bro. You'll get to safety. And I'll take it." So, obviously not exactly the same. But, I think of it in that word that term.

Mike: And it's [unintelligible 00:21:41.02] with you.

[Shawna laughs]

Mike: You could be absolutely and do whatever it takes to be in a situation like that, so it's a good thing to do.

Shawna: Yeah. Well, good luck with that research and that project. And tell us where we can find you online.

Mike: You can find me at mikedash.history.com. That's where you find them. That's where I hang out most of the time.

Shawna: And there are a ton of cool stories on this website, people. So, please check it out, learn a little bit, write your own song [laughs] about something, and then share with us. All right, thank you so much Mike for joining me on New Year's Eve. Thank you.

Mike: It's been a pleasure.

Shawna: I appreciate it. Thanks again to Mike for the fascinating look into 17th century Italy. I learned even more [laughs] about Aqua Tofana. So, in this song I take on the perspective of one woman looking to kill her husband. That's how the song starts, and then really quickly I zoom out to show that this is bigger than me, this is happening on a global scale. So, now we're into the second component of the song. The idea that for violence against women to actually end, all men must die. To be clear, I'm not saying I believe that. To even entertain the idea, it's kind of a joke, right? I've mentioned this in interviews for the new album, but it's sort of a response to what I think Emma Race and trolls and even just your average dude bro, what I think they assume about our band, right? That they assume a feminist band would want to kill all the men. So, for fun I wanted to take that to its logical conclusion.

I do have a backstory to the song, a soft implication I guess that whatever organizing body is executing this plan that they've worked out all the details regarding potential age limits, is there a cut off, are we saving everyone under the age of eight or are we just across the board dead? But I don't know. And also that they've thought about how this plan affects trans folks, non-binary gender, non-conforming people. They're not transphobic, but I've heard personally have not worked out what those details would be. Part of this is 100% laziness. Sure. Part of it is not wanting to be picked up by the FBI. I don't really need a notebook in my house with very detailed plans on how to kill all men.

But I guess mostly it's an artistic choice. I didn't want the song to be bogged down with the

minutiae of a plan like this and distract the listener from feeling this woman's anger, the impatience, the desperation to think that this is the only way to stop violence against women once and for all. Before I move on, which we're going to get to band interviews in a second, let me make it clear that anyone is capable of harm and abuse. And it can happen to anyone. But when it comes to intimate partner violence across all gender makeups of couples, violence is more likely when a man is at least one of the partners in a relationship. But it is a much bigger problem, more complicated and nuanced than I can get into here. So let me say whoever you are, you deserve a relationship free of violence and abuse. You deserve a healthy relationship.

And if you're not sure if what you're experiencing is healthy or not or if you know that you need help, call the domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799 SAFE s a f e or visit the hotline.org. Okay. Deep exhale. Okay. Let's lighten it up, right? Let's meet the band War On Women and hear what they have to say about the song Aqua Tofana. And just need to get my little questions, my little questions for you.

Dave: Oh yeah, you got questions?

Shawna: Yeah.

Dave: It's like an interview? [laughs]

Shawna: This is a straight-up interview. Dave--

Dave: Whoa.

Shawna: --Cavalier, thank you for joining me on the podcast. This is a straight-up interview. Are you ready?

Dave: Wow, here we go. I hope I'm prepared.

[Shawna laughs]

Dave: But I'll embarrass myself.

Shawna: First, I just want you to introduce yourself to everybody.

Dave: My name is Dave Cavalier. I play drums in War On Women and a Baltimore based musician. Any other pertinent information? [laughs]

Shawna: Let's go through each song and see if you've got anything to say about writing it, recording it, just anything. So, Aqua Tofana.

Dave: Mhm. Aqua Tofana is--

Shawna: You can pass if you want. [laughs]

Dave: Aqua Tofana is fucking awesome. [laughs] It's definitely one of my favorite songs to play. I

feel like that song has like metal cred, if that makes sense. I feel like there's like some fucking bro who's got like I don't know.

Shawna: Vendetta against women and bands?

Dave: Yeah. Yeah, or some fucking like Flying V guitar at home. And he's like, "I only shred, bro. This band is about to be bullshit." And then we come out and we play Aqua Tofana, he'd be like, "Okay, I'm gonna go home. And I'm gonna learn that riff cuz he crushes."

[Shawna laughs]

Dave: Yeah, I love that song. I love the subject matter of that song, kill all the men. We should at least discuss it as a possibility as a society.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: Just leave it on the table as an option.

Dave: Yeah.

Shawna: That's all we're saying. No. We're being sarcastic, everybody.

[Dave laughs]

Shawna: But yeah. Actually do you remember me talking to you about this song in rehearsal?

Dave: Yeah. Yeah. You said, "What if we did, what would it look like?" I was like--

Shawna: And what did you say, do you remember?

Dave: Yeah. I was like, "Well, you'd have to be organized. You'd have to--"

Shawna: That's right.

Dave: "--all get together and talk about how things were gonna run after all the men were dead. You'd have to probably like free some sperm or something if you wanted to continue to, first, if you wanted to keep having civilization."

Shawna: Populate the Earth. Yeah.

Dave: Yeah, if you wanted to keep populating or maybe not. Maybe you wanted to be like, "This is fine, we'll just like let this ride out."

[Dave and Shawna laugh]

Dave: "We've been here long enough. This Earth deserves a break."

Shawna: Earth's been a rush.

Dave: Yes.

Shawna: It's okay. [laughs]

Dave: Yeah.

Shawna: Yeah, I can visualize it. We're in the rehearsal space. Brooks is there may be doing something with his pedals like he always does.

Dave: Mhm.

Shawna: And just kind of asking you and your answer of like you got to be organized, I was like, "Oh, I didn't think about that." I was like--

[Dave laughs]

Dave: You were like [unintelligible 00:28:56.07] "Kill them all." [laughs]

Shawna: Well, I didn't think that you would answer that. I thought you'd be like, "Well, you shouldn't." Or [laughs] Or, "Hey, we're not all that." No, I'm just kidding.

Dave: Yeah. Not all men.

Shawna: No, I thought it would be yeah, it'd be like you'd give me an answer of what society would look like after every thing was done.

Dave: Mhm.

Shawna: But you were like, "All right. If you're gonna do this, you need a plan."

Dave: Right. [laughs]

Shawna: And I was like, "Yeah, we do." Maybe this song is not about this potential utopia--

Dave: Right.

Shawna: --which might not happen anyway if this thought experiment actually got played out. But yeah. Maybe this song is about how we get there.

Dave: Mhm.

Shawna: Why are we even getting to this as an option in the first place?

Dave: Right.

Shawna: Yeah.

Dave: Yeah, I like it.

Shawna: Jen Vito, thank you so much for joining me today. You don't actually prefer to go by Jen Vito. That's just my favorite way to say your name.

[Jen laughs]

Jen: It's like we went to elementary school together.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: Yeah.

Jen [00:30:00.26]: Well, I'll call you Shawna Potter.

Shawna: Like you are one of many Jens that needed a last name attached, right? [laughs]

Jen: Yeah.

Shawna: So, what should we call you when we see you at shows in the future?

Jen: I guess you can call me Jenarchy. Okay, Aqua Tofana. I think I was more intimidated by that song at first or I just I was like it has a I don't know what you call it. I don't know if it's a minor note or something, but it had something else. And that's kind of weird.

[Shawna laughs]

Jen: And then it grew on me to be like one of my favorites. I know the band likes that song a lot. But yeah, that's a hard hitter to kind of like typical Brooks style song or something.

Shawna: Brooks Harlan, thank you for joining me.

Brooks: Shawna Potter, thanks for having me.

[Shawna laughs]

Brooks: Okay. Well, I'm bringing up the lyrics here.

Shawna: Okay.

Brooks: And I've got the sheet music in front of me so I make sure I don't forget anything. So Aqua Tofana, the writing of that song happened relatively quickly. The first riff that starts off the song was an older riff that was definitely around pre Capture The Flag, and I could just never figure out how it could fit. It was part of this much longer sort of metal song that I had written, and it wasn't even really the main part. And listening back through different demos, I sort of zeroed in on that riff and really liked it and thought of it standing on its own for the first time. And then I know I needed to finish out the song, so I remember just being at home and kind of playing that riff and just seeing kind of where my hands would naturally go. The song is essentially an A part, a B part, and a C part. And so if that original sort of metal riff was the A part, the B part just kind of came out of that. And then the C part came out of that just sitting on

the couch just messing around on guitar.

Shawna: Is that something that you do like while watching TV where your brain is somewhere else or are you just concentrating on playing guitar?

Brooks: I am not allowed to play guitar and watch TV, so that doesn't happen.

[Shawna laughs]

Shawna: Not allowed?

Brooks: No. I wish I could do it more.

Shawna: Too annoying for everyone you live with?

Brooks: Yeah.

[Shawna laughs]

Brooks: So, this was me just playing on the couch with nothing else on just cuz that's where I was sitting. And I was thinking about that song. And once it kind of came out, I was like, "This is gonna be the first song on the record. Like what what a great way to start a record."

Shawna: You knew right away?

Brooks: Yeah, and I could sort of hear it'd go. And I made a little demo maybe that night or the next day just so I had the parts kind of down the way I wanted them. And then that week I think you and me and Dave met up. And I kind of showed it to him in practice. This was not a song where I sent him the demo and then he kind of learned and listen to it.

Shawna: Right.

Brooks: I showed it to him in practice. I think we made one change. And that was his idea. At the end of the phrase the original part went, "Da-na-na-na-na-da." But he suggested, "Da-na-na-na-na-na-na."

[Shawna laughs]

Brooks: Just that little change. I think it was just so he could fit a drum fill in there exactly like I don't know. It is cool. It gets a little bigger of a kick. But other than that, the song stayed pretty much exactly the same as the way I wrote it, like the form and the length. And I think we messed around with the ending like how long it should go.

Shawna: Yeah. Yeah.

Brooks: I think originally we thought it could go forever and we could fade it out. I've never done a fade out song before. And we might have even thought that up until we were recording, but it ended so strongly. When we're recording, I remember just landing cuz it lands on a A flat

chord. And we all hit it, and it just seems so in tune and so final. And so we kept that, and I was real happy about that. So--

Shawna: And I know that we've had discussions to maybe that song and others where how long we do something depends on what I'm singing and do I have a bunch of stuff I gotta say or do I want to repeat it or--

Brooks: Yeah.

Shawna: And in some a conversation between us all to just make sure all the pieces fit.

Brooks: Yeah, I think in this song in particular that was the case at the end. The other sections were pretty much done. And I was like, "This goes this many times, this goes this many times." And you worked in vocals to that. But then when it got to the end. I sort of had a build up in mind of when different things we're gonna start. Cuz what I like about the end is it starts with one feel. And without really actually changing the tonality, it moves into a different--

Shawna: Yes.

Brooks: --riff almost. And there were certain building blocks along the way to get that to happen. And so when those happened, I could sort of add to or subtract from depending on when you sang things. And I think we messed around with when you were gonna come in with the lyrics and when you were gonna stop. And so I'm really happy with the final decision on when those things happen.

Shawna: Wanna move on, or was there anything else for now?

Brooks: Well, it depends on how much you want. I could talk about all these songs forever.

Shawna: Do you have any memories in the studio of recording Aqua Tofana?

Brooks: There's a couple little things in the song that I actually added in the studio like little guitar overdubs that didn't exist before we went into the studio, and that's sort of rare for me. I tend to pre-plan guitar parts quite a bit. But sometimes such as in this song, in the B section there's like a little guitar harmony that's sort of slayer harmony. It's like parallel fourth. And I just didn't feel like it was being reinforced quite enough, so I added another little overdub that instead of going cuz the normal part goes, "Da-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na." But I wrote a little thing that goes, "Da-na-na-da-na-na-da-na-na-da-na-na-da-na-na-na-na." And it's just tucked in the mix a little bit.

[Shawna laughs]

Brooks: So, it doesn't sound like a solo. But I really like the way it reinforces that. And, subsequently, as I think about playing these songs live I actually sort of came up with a way to sort of amalgamate those two parts. And so I'm actually playing the guitar part differently. They're live or I will be playing it live than I recorded it. So, that's sort of interesting.

Shawna: Susan Warner, thanks for joining me today.

Susan: What's up, Shawna Potter?

Shawna: Hi, I miss you.

Susan: I miss you, too. [laughs]

Shawna: Aw. Yeah.

Susan: Yeah. So, that sounds awesome. It is really fun to play. The beginning slayer part is like--

[Shawna laughs]

Susan: It's fast. It's not that hard, but it's fast. But when it goes into that kind of I don't know I call it the Led Zeppelin part. That part, it's like so cool. I don't know. It's just like such a good groove.

Shawna: Yeah.

Susan: I actually didn't know the Shellac song.

Shawna: Oh, really?

Susan: Yeah. Even my brother like Josh Reynolds was like, "Is this like a nod to that Shellac song?" And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. Which Shellac song?"

[Shawna laughs]

Susan: And then I looked up and I was like, "Oh, I would say probably yes."

[Shawna and Susan laugh]

Shawna: What did you think hearing that Shellac song after hearing Aqua Tofana?

Susan: So, I thought it was really cool. I was like, "That's cool. That's like kind of like one of the like--" I said this on the album release live stream. It's like there's references that you don't need to get. But if you do get them, they are even better. And that's like definitely one of those.

Shawna: Thank you for the segue, Sue. Okay, let's talk about that Shellac song Prayer to God, written by Steve Albini who's been quoted as saying that that song examines the different facets of impotent male rage. He says, "I feel like there are dudes not getting it who think I am voicing their deepest thoughts when I'm trying to expose a fundamental weakness in a male identity." I won't play the song, go search for it. But, basically, he's asking God, who he assumes will be sympathetic to his request to kill his ex girlfriend and the man she cheated on him with. He talks about how he wants him to die. And he grows impatient about the way in which they're gonna die and eventually is like, "Just kill this guy already, all right? Kill him. Kill him. Kill him already. Kill him." That's the part I stole. Why did I steal this? Well, this is a song that was on regular

rotation, a big crunch and prepare where I've worked for the last 12 years.

Sometimes in a workplace there's just those same records or playlists that everybody gets into, and this is just one of those albums. So, I've always wanted War On Women to cover it in some way either as is and just kind of flip the script a little bit or rework it to be about Trump or something and perform it at some festival or even two minutes of late night performance. Or I wanted to steal the lyrics. And that's what I ended up doing. So, it turns out the best opportunity to do something with the song was to use him as a placeholder for all men in this song's fictional reality. I have no idea if Steve Albini would like what I've done with it. But everyone listening, please feel free to bombard him with a link so we can find out. [laughs]

[Music]

Shawna [00:41:56.16]: Big thanks to our official sponsor First Defense Krav Maga outside of DC and Virginia. They're offering as much online content right now as they can, so please check them out if you're in the area. You can also sign up to be a sponsor on my Patreon page, FYI, if you've got that kind of cash. It really does help, and we'll give you a shout out on the show. Speaking of, one of the recruits has another question for me to answer on air. Okay, so remember Stefan and Yuliana from episode zero? Well, Yuliana came up with another question. She asks, "Do you only write when you are inspired or do you sometimes force it or do it just under pressure?" So, I don't believe in writer's block. And I say that to explain that wherever inspiration comes from, however small, I'm always writing it down. I have my lyric book on me at all times. I also have a phone now, so I can just put it in the Notes app. But I write things down all the time even if it's just a word or phrase so that I can reference it later and use it as I need it. And every so often, I get lucky enough that a full song kind of just comes out of me at once. But that's a little more rare.

So the only times that I'm writing a song and I feel kind of forced is when there's a deadline, right? It's happened just a couple times where like for The Ash Is Not the End which we'll get to eventually in this season, the first time we recorded that song it was to put it out on Adult Swim single series. And so we wrote the song specifically to take part in that series. So, we needed to hurry up and get it done and get them the song. And I just did my best to make the song make sense. Another time would be basically anytime that we're a few days away from recording. By the time we go into the studio, I've probably finished 90% of the lyrics. But there's always some song that just isn't coming to me quickly enough. And I save it for last, and then it's all I have to deal with. And it can be frustrating. So, on this record that song was Seeds. And one of the ways I got out of this potential writer's block was to interview friends and talk to them about what I thought the song would be about and just hear what they had to say, and I just wrote down anything that they said that was interesting to me. And I totally ended up using it.

So, I try to vary the way that I'm inspired to write lyrics so that I never feel, even if I have a deadline, even if I'm under pressure, I never feel like I'm just completely stuck. Long answer there. But that's the answer. We also have a question from Melissa, one of my meatheads on

Patreon. She asked, "If you could recommend one thing an average person could do to promote safer spaces, what would it be?" This is a really good question, and I don't know if I can tell you one thing. I guess probably the most important thing and the first thing would be to observe, pay attention to what's going on around you, pay attention to people that might look uncomfortable, see that everyone is having a good time or not, and then just know that if not you then who, right? If you don't do or say something, who else is going to do it? So, that means that the thing you can do is one of the five D's of bystander intervention. And I go into full detail about that in my book Making Spaces Safer, but I didn't invent the five D's. And you can Google it. I recommend checking out the Hollaback! website ihollaback.org and finding it there.

But, these five D's of bystander intervention will work for you no matter what the situation is, your safety level, your personality type, right? How comfortable you are confronting someone your size, whether or not you look like the person being harassed or the harasser. There's a D for every situation. And just real quick, the D's are direct, delegate, distract, delay, and document. So, check out what those are. And then just have practiced conversations with the people in your life to see what it might sound like if you had to use one of the five D's in real life, right? Practicing really helps get over the clunkiness that can happen when you're trying something new for the first time. So, I highly recommend practicing. I really believe in that. That's why the book that I wrote on safer spaces didn't come out of nowhere. It came out of training venues, training people in person for like six or seven years. Because that is what helps people really do a good job instead of just put up a poster and hope for the best. So, practice, practice, practice.

That was Episode One of But Her Lyrics. Keep listening to hear Aqua Tofana in full. Look for the next episode in around two weeks. It will be a doozy. I'll be speaking with Carol Adams, author of The Sexual Politics of Meat in reference to our song Milk and Blood track two from the brand new full length War On Women album Wonderful Hell. You'll get the most out of this podcast by listening to each song in advance, but I will be sure to play it at the end of each episode. Wonderful Hell is available on vinyl from Bridge 9 Records, digitally from Bridge 9 and Bandcamp, and it's streaming in all the usual places. Big thanks again to Brooks Harlan, WOW guitarist and engineer extraordinaire for all the editing help and for chopping up our song Her? to create the podcast theme song.

[Music]

Shawna: If you'd like to support this podcast and this band, there are a ton of ways to do it. Share, subscribe, and review this podcast. It helps. Buy War On Women merch from b9store.com, shirtkiller.com, or in the UK and Europe you can order through Coretex Records and lhpmerch.com. You can find all these links in the show notes on my website shawnapotter.com. You can buy my book Making Spaces Safer on akpress.org, or from your local independent bookstore. And it's now available in Spanish from Orsini press out of Spain.

Check out Big Crunch Amplifier Service & Design our guitarist bookshop. He can fix your gear if

you live near Baltimore or design and build a tube amp or pedal of your dreams. You can also join my Patreon and help me keep this pod going. Join in at the seeds level at only \$1 a month or donate more to get tons of perks like merch, behind the scenes look at making the podcast, exclusive meandering conversations with people I think are cool and more. Thanks for listening.

[Music]

[Aqua Tofana-War On Women]

My husband, prepare for death

I gave you the time to repent

But time's up, yeah, you have to go

Your whole kind had a good run

We're left with no other option

So time's up, yeah, you have to go

Aqua Tofana

Belladonna

Arsenic, lead

Until he's dead

Four doses

One generation

They all have to die

So we can live

There is no giant plot

We are not all in on it

We will deny we've got it all planned out

From the bottom up, it spreads

To presidential candidates

No exceptions will be allowed

Aqua Tofana

Belladonna

Arsenic, lead

Until he's dead

"He's one of the good ones." Well, good or not, you must

Kill him, kill him, kill him already, kill him

A day will come, we'll wink and nod and

Kill him, kill him, kill him already, kill him

Politics aside, do it for humankind, just

Kill him, kill him, kill him already, kill him

A fucking legend to would-be widows, just

Kill him, kill him, kill him already, kill him

A fucking legend to would-be widows, just

Kill him, kill him, kill him already, kill him

A fucking legend to would-be widows, just

Kill him, kill him, kill him, kill him