

**Song Exploder**  
**Clairo - Alewife**  
**Episode 169**

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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

*("Alewife" by CLAIRO)*

Hrishikesh: Before we begin, there are a couple of things I wanted to mention about the episode you're about to hear. First of all, if you have an Amazon Echo smart speaker, you might want to disable it or turn it off or something because you're going to hear the name, Alexa, in this episode a few times. And if your speaker's in ear shot, it's probably going to do a whole thing. Secondly, on a serious note, this episode deals in part with thoughts of suicide so please be careful and be mindful. Also, if you're having thoughts of suicide yourself, confidential help is available for free. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK. That's 800-273-TALK. You can also text the Crisis Text Line, just text the word "Hello" to 741-741. You are not alone. I've put a link up to these resources on the Song Exploder website. If you want to join me in making a donation to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, you can find the info on the website as well. I'll mention it again at the end of this episode. Alright, here we go. Claire Cotrill is a singer, songwriter, and producer who goes by the name Clairo. She started releasing music in 2014. A few years later, songs she'd uploaded to YouTube had racked up over 40 million views. This year, Clairo put out her debut album, *Immunity*. She's recently performed on Ellen and Jimmy Kimmel, and played arenas, opening for Khalid. In this episode, Clairo breaks down her song "Alewife." I spoke to Claire and her co-producer Rostam Batmanglij, who's formerly of the band Vampire Weekend and whose other producing credits include HAIM, Maggie Rogers, and Charli XCX. Here's Clairo on Song Exploder.

*("Alewife" by CLAIRO)*

Claire: My name is Claire Cotrill, also known as Clairo.

*(Music fades out)*

Claire: This song was born at Truth Studios in Los Angeles. I spent a month out in Los Angeles, writing the record, and I just spent everyday in this studio, occasionally landing on songs. So I was writing some guitar and came up with

*(Guitar)*

Claire: I had been talking to my best friend, Alexa, at the time, just you know, texting her, while I was doing guitar. She was there for me in a really difficult time. I was going through a lot of depression and anxiety throughout middle school and high school, and it really hit a low point in eighth grade. It got to a point where it was like I just couldn't really leave my room. I wasn't really even close with Alexa at the time, but I remember talking to her one night, telling her that, you know, "I didn't want to be here anymore." It was a rough night for me, it was like, I was afraid of what was going to happen. And before I knew it, there were police officers at my door because Alexa had called for them. You know, she was with me the whole night, calling me, and texting me, and trying to be there for me, which is something I had never had in my whole life. Never had a best friend like that or someone who would drop everything to make sure that I was okay, especially at that time. And for a while, I was mad that there were police officers involved and that I had to go to therapy, and that it was this whole ordeal. But without her, I have no idea how my life would be now. So when I was writing the guitar, I just decided that it was time for me to talk about this experience, less about how sad it was, and more about how grateful I am for Alexa.

*(Vocals along with electric guitar: "I met you by surprise / You were hangin' out all the time / But you know you saved me from doin' / Something to myself that night")*

*(Guitar)*

Claire: I just was like too impatient to go into the booth and record the vocals so I just decided to pull out the good old voice memos. The only reason I recorded it on my phone was to send her the song so that she knew that I had written a song about it.

Alexa: My name is Alexa. I was sitting in the dining room with my mom, and I get a text from Claire, and she goes, "I wrote a song about you," and I was like, "Okay, wait what?" And she sent me the demo and I go, "Okay mom, I'm going to play something Claire sent me." And I play it off my phone, and we both just started crying.

*(Vocals along with electric guitar: "It's been so long / And you've been my sister all along")*

*(Guitar)*

Alexa: I just felt so many things going through my body of just all these emotions, and it took me back to the night that that song was about, which we don't really talk about a lot, but we know that it was there.

*(Guitar ends)*

Claire: It still felt pretty fresh to talk about. I guess I was 13 at the time, and I'm 21 now. It's something that my family and I talked about but never really brought up unless we had to. Never really brought it up to my friends, especially in music, it made me feel really seen to write a song about that specific night. And then I recorded it for real with a drum machine.

*(Electric guitar along with drum machine)*

Claire: I had been listening to a lot of Elliott Smith, and it was important for me to double track the vocals, I think that was like one of my favourite things about Elliott Smith's music.

*(Vocals along with electric guitar and drum machine: "In Massachusetts / Only 30 minutes from Alewife / I lay in my room / Wonderin' why I've got this life")*

*(Electric guitar along with drum machine)*

Claire: That was kind of like the evolved demo before Rostam was involved.

Rostam: My name is Rostam Batmanglij.

*(Music fades out)*

Rostam: I was at a party and someone mentioned Claire's music, and they were like, "Have you heard Claire?" And then I went home, and I listened to her music, and I was like, "Woah, there's something about this person's voice," it sounded like a voice that I had heard my whole life or something, like it felt familiar in a way, and I was drawn to it. So then I, I think I just dm'd her, and just said, "Hey, what's up, I like your music."

Claire: I was shocked, I didn't even think he knew I existed. That was like a, just a big moment for me, just because I've always been such a big fan.

Rostam: So I think we were both kind of like, "Should we try to make some music?"

*(Electric guitar along with drum machine)*

Rostam: Claire brought me the sessions of the songs that she'd started on her own. And I hadn't actually had very much experience working in that way, where the vocals are recorded and the artist says, "I don't want to re-record the vocals, I'm happy with them." So all the vocals on the song are the ones that Claire recorded at Truth.

*(Vocals along with electric guitar and drum machine: "You called me seven times / One, two, three, four, on the line / I didn't mean to scare you / Just had the thoughts in my mind")*

Rostam: She is such a huge part of not just the songwriting of this song, which she wrote, but also the production. I loved getting these songs from Claire, and getting the whole Pro Tools session, and to sit together in a room, and really take something that she had started the production, and then put our heads together. So all the guitar on the song, "Alewife," is played by Claire. The one thing I asked her to do, when we got to my studio, was to replay her electric guitar parts on acoustic guitar.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Rostam: Because to me, that pushed it more into the world of Elliott Smith. Just because the songs that I connect the most strongly with are his acoustic guitar songs.

Claire: Yeah, exactly.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

*(Piano)*

Rostam: After we recorded the acoustics, I started playing the chords on the piano. I didn't know that that could be the start of the song.

Claire: Mm-hmm.

Rostam: It was just kind of like another way of activating the chords, I was thinking like, "There's something about the way that the chord progression interacts with the vocal melody that's really powerful." So I didn't change anything, the rhythm, or, I don't think [laughter], I didn't change any of the chords.

Claire: No you didn't.

Rostam: I just kind of activated them differently on the piano.

Claire: It felt really good to hear the piano with guitar for the first time.

*(Acoustic guitar along with piano)*

Rostam: As soon as I heard this song, I was kind of like, picturing a drummer holding it down on the tom, the 16th notes. That image just popped into my mind, so when we were in the studio together, that's how I kind of started the beat with just that tom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.

*(Toms beat)*

Rostam: All the individual samples are recorded with a tape machine, and there's three different velocities and three different samples for every velocity, so for each hit, there's nine different samples that you could trigger with your keyboard. So even though the drums aren't real, because it does, it actually, when you hear it in isolation, it does kind of sound fake, but if you hear it in the song, it doesn't sound fake. They sound like they could be real.

Claire: I think the drums are everything.

*(Toms beat)*

Rostam: Halfway through the song, there's a hi-hat that comes in, it's just like a drummer clamping the two hi-hats together.

*(Toms along with hi-hats)*

Rostam: It kind of opens up this portal like you can hear the beat a few different ways. That's the kind of stuff that I've always tried to do with drums, just trying to

make you hear rhythm differently throughout the song, like so it's like a chapter, you know.

Claire: Mm-hmm.

Rostam: It's like a new chapter unfolds where suddenly this hi-hat comes in and it's keeping time in a different way and it's adding an emphasis in a different place.

Claire: It's movement.

*(Toms along with hi-hats end)*

Claire: The chords don't change throughout the whole song. And there's no like bridge, there's no real structure to the song, and [laughter] I always tend to do that. But Rostam was never afraid of that, he always found ways to bring movement into the song. I mean one of the biggest things about this whole record in general was taking songs that were almost there,

*(Electric guitar along with drum machine)*

Claire: and then bringing them there. Rostam was so great at not taking away the things that I had made but just elevating them.

Rostam: Yeah, so that electric guitar is still actually in the song, I copied and pasted it over to the very end of the song, and then I also put a fuzz distortion effect.

*(Electric guitar fuzz distortion)*

Claire: I guess what I like most about this song is that there are moments that are so soft, but then there's also really harsh moments like the distortion. Having that both on one song is really special to me because tying it to the lyrics, this experience can feel really soft and personal, and hard to talk about. But then those emotions can also feel really harsh. They can feel like everything's crashing down on you. And having both of those moments in the song did a lot for me. Because it is that grey area.

*(Electric guitar fuzz distortion)*

*(Vocals along with electric guitar fuzz distortion and beat: "It's been so long / And you've been my sister all along / But you know I'll be alright / Eighth grade was never that tight")*

Claire: The last line, “You know I’ll be alright, eighth grade was never that tight,” it’s like just adding some humor into something that’s just the least humorous thing in the world because I find my most favorite songs are just honest, doesn’t necessarily feel like everything has to rhyme or everything has to sound like a groundbreaking lyric. You can just talk directly to the person listening,

*(Piano)*

Claire: and they can understand, talking to them, like your friend or like someone that you’re actually telling the story to is important. But it’s also important to acknowledge that like no one liked eighth grade. No one. Anyone who does like eighth grade is a psychopath.

*(Vocals along with piano and beat: “In Massachusetts / Only 30 minutes from Alewife / I lay in my room / Wonderin’ why I’ve got this life”)*

Claire: The original title for this song was “Eighth Grade,” and naming it, “Alewife,” became really important. I mention “Alewife” only once in the song, and it’s not necessarily about it. Alewife was a train station in Massachusetts that I would drive to from my small town. I parked there and I would take the T to different parts of the city. Wherever I wanted to go, I could get there from Alewife.

*(Pad)*

Claire: I think the reason why I started this song with those words was because it just became this kind of portal to a different world. Growing up in a small town of like 5,000 people can be really hard to feel understood, and when I started to be more involved in the music scene in Boston, going to house shows, like meeting kids from there, and going to flea markets and meeting kids there. Just like talking to them about music, and them knowing the same stuff I know, that was the first time I was like, “Woah, I live in a really small town and there’s so many people in the world that are just like me.”

*(Pad)*

Claire: It’s like 30 minutes from Alewife. From the 13 year old me, I’m like, “Damn that’s so far. I don’t have a car, I don’t drive, my mom won’t drive me 30 minutes to a train station,” but then now it’s like, “Wow, I was only 30 minutes from this place that opened up so much for me.” A lot of my growing up was in solitude, and

something that I just never did was I never changed for other people. And I think that's what drove a lot of people away, and that's what made me want to seclude myself. But yeah, I just kind of like, until Alexa, I just felt kind of lost. She just like really gave me the confidence to continue to be myself, and she's the reason why I even pursued music in a lot of ways. It's really important that I talk about how amazing people like Alexa are, and how a lot of people have those people, whether they know it or not. There's someone like Alexa that would come out of the woodwork to make sure that you're okay. And that was what I wanted to, to say the most, it's kind of like a love song to her.

Alexa: Back in November, on my birthday last year, she sent me the sweetest message and acknowledged that night, you know, everything that had happened, and wrote this really heartfelt message to me kind of thanking me for our friendship, and how without what had happened that night, things probably would have been very different and, you know, maybe she wouldn't have been here but when the album came out, I took the time to put in my headphones, and sit down, and just be with the song. And it made me so emotional but so thankful that I had this friendship with such an incredible person.

Claire: And I will forever be grateful for what she did. There's nothing more, nothing less, it's just grateful forever.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Alewife," by Clairo, in its entirety.

*("Alewife" by CLAIRO)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information about Clairo and Rostam. You'll also find a link to buy or stream, "Alewife". Thanks so much to Alexa for speaking to me for this episode as well. And again, if you're having thoughts about suicide, or if you're worried about a friend, or loved one, or if you'd like emotional support, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 across the US. You can find out more at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org). And you can call 800-273-TALK or text the word, "Hello," to 741-741. If you'd like to make a donation to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, their website is [afsp.org](http://afsp.org).

Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, along with producer Christian Koons. Olivia Wood helped with production assistance, Carlos Lerma is our illustrator. For most of this year, filling in for me has been guest host, Thao Nguyen, she'll be back next episode. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated collective of independent, creative podcasts.



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