

**Song Exploder**  
**Laura Marling - Song For Our Daughter**  
**Episode 184**

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.

*("Song for Our Daughter" by LAURA MARLING)*

Hrishikesh: Before we start, I want to mention that, in this episode, there's some discussions of themes that might be difficult for some: sexual harassment and assault, as well as a mention of rape and suicide. Please use your best discretion. Laura Marling is a singer and songwriter from London. She won the Brit Award for Best British Female Solo Artist - she's been nominated five times for that, along with the Mercury Prize, and the Grammy for Best Folk Album. Since 2008, she's released seven albums. The most recent is called *Song for Our Daughter*. It's also the name of the song that she takes apart in this episode. I spoke to Laura while she was in her home studio in London.

*("Song for Our Daughter" by LAURA MARLING)*

Laura: My name is Laura Marling.

*(Music fades out)*

Laura: This is the longest I've ever taken to write a record. You know, I started very young. I put out my first album when I was 17, and I'm now 30. When I was young, in a really wonderful way, and I think everybody experiences this when they're young, you're kind of a functioning narcissist [laughter], in that you have this experience of the world, in which you are the central character. And I think that's wonderful, because I think that is full of color and vibrancy and it's a very necessary experience when you're young. But there was maybe an accumulation of events that led to this sort of next rite of passage as a person. I metabolized a few experiences that I'd had as a younger woman that were very complex and in some ways un-digestible. The experience of somebody trampling a boundary that you weren't even aware needed to be policed. And the sort of traumatic effect of that experience can have the effect of taking you out of the naive space. It really pushes you out of that time where you feel like the center of your own movie, and it makes you this kind of vulnerable, you feel like there are no boundaries. There is nothing protecting you, you know, it's all in

your mind, any sense of safety. And I think I felt a tremendous sense of unity in those experiences, because I think a lot of young women go through them. But I came to a point in my life where the experiences had led up to me being able to cope with what they were, and move through them in a satisfying way.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Laura: About a year after I made my last album, I was in France with my partner, and we were staying in a sort of cabin outside Toulouse. And he's also a musician, and he has this very strange habit of playing the same chord sequence over and over and over and over again, until he's kind of perfected the playing of it.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Laura: And that chord sequence ended up seeping into my unconscious, and I ended up writing a song with it, without ever having asked him what the chord sequence was.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Laura: So he's got a co-writing credit on this track, which is nice. I've got a Martin M-32, and it's a 1986 Brazilian rosewood guitar, and it's my sort of pride and joy. I always take that with me wherever I go. When a song comes easy, I feel like I'm surgically attached to the guitar until it's done. So I will go over and over and over, I'll start singing nonsense over the top of it. And it will mutate into what will end up being the song. So it's, it's not like it comes out perfect, but it comes out in the course of 24 hours, I'd say.

*(Second verse demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I've lately got to thinking about my daughter growing old / All of the bullshit that she might be told")*

Laura: I do not have a daughter. I have no children. Like all people, I felt the kind of biological, chemical urge to have children. I have goddaughters and I have nephews, and, you know, there's still every possibility that I might have children at some point. But my rational brain is very ambivalent about it. I think the inspiration for "Song for Our Daughter," you know, somewhere at the back of my mind, existed in my experience of having read this book by Maya Angelou called *Letters to my Daughter*. It's a series of kind of essays written to a non-existent daughter that are an accumulation of her experiences in life and how they've

contributed to how she conducts herself. And the implied openness of Maya Angelou's book that it could be read by me, and the lessons could be for me

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Laura: and I can interpret them in any way I can, I find that incredibly moving.

*(Acoustic guitar ends)*

Laura: I have been fortunate enough in the last couple of years to have a studio in my basement. So I spent a long time in my studio experimenting with sounds, trying to find things that accentuated the emotional moments and indulging in lushness a bit. So the demo's all me, playing everything.

*(Chorus full demo: "You can't remember what I said / And the book I left by your bed / The words that will outlive the dead")*

Laura: Another kind of influence on the song is a very tragic, it's a story from sort of Roman antiquity, it's called the Rape of Lucretia. And it's about this young noblewoman who, the evening before her wedding, is raped. And no one believed her. And in that time they believed if you'd been any way kind of sullied, your blood would turn black. And so she rode into court one morning and she stabbed herself in the chest, and of course her blood was black and she died. I came across that story and was kind of struck by its contemporary relevance. All over contemporary culture is this very contentious meeting between experience and law, and how difficult it is for traumatized women to correctly, by in terms of the language of law, express their experience. They're just not very well understood, and that frustration is sad.

*(Second verse demo vocals: "From the blood on the floor / maybe now you believe her for sure")*

Laura: With a demo like that, a kind of highly fleshed out demo. It's like painting, you know, impasto, whatever they say, you know, kind of very thick brush strokes, and then you take it to a sort of master classical painter and they do it in far more detail. So I sort of have a core musical team that I work with a lot. The longest serving member of my musical team is a guy called Nick Peeney, who's an amazing jazz bassist.

*(Bass)*

Laura: And then we had this pianist called Anna Cochran who had this beautiful taste. Her taste is really unusual in what she chooses to play.

*(Piano along with bass)*

Laura: I co-produced this record with Ethan Johns. And he played drums on this track.

*(Drums along with bass)*

Laura: He's actually one of my favorite drummers.

*(Drums along with piano and bass)*

Laura: The last verse is a very unexpected entrance of some very straight forward drumming. Until then, to me, it feels like it could live out its entire course being a kind of ballad-y song. And then suddenly there's this drive added at the last moment and it's unexpected and it's kind of just what you need to keep you interested in it. Instruments when they're well-placed feel like they're holding me up. And I feel like the drums are doing that in this circumstance. They're kind of offering a tactile support.

*(Chorus full track: "You remember what I said? / The book you left by your bed / The words that will outlive the dead")*

Laura: Since the very first recording I ever did, I've never recorded vocals and guitar separately, so I always play my acoustic guitar and sing at the same time because, to me, the important relationship that's happening there is my bodily relationship to the guitar because the resonant part of my chest is touching the guitar, and it sort of seemed insane to me that you would ever take those two things apart. They're one thing. So much to the annoyance of every engineer I've ever worked with, that's how I record.

*(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Though they may want you to tread in their trail / Only to see if the path they set fails")*

Laura: As I get older, I enjoy the kind of, the increasing responsibility to a younger generation, to protect their innocence and their freedom in the most vibrant time of their lives, where they will be the most creative and the most interested in the world and have the most interesting ideas. The idea that that can be cut short by

a sort of cultural injustice, I find that a very sad thing. It's all something that children and young people deserve to be protected from. And if we could change the culture from our perspective at our time in life, what would we change? That was the sort of overriding feeling that I felt.

*(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Though they may want you to take off your clothes / Whatever they think that the action exposed / With your clothes on the floor / Taking advice from some old balding bore / You'll ask yourself / "Did I want this at all?")*

Laura: We were recording in Wales, which was about five hours away from where I live, and I would come home at the weekends and put backing vocals and everything that we did during the week in my little studio, and then bring them back on my laptop. I find that backing vocals are the most embarrassing thing to do in front of other people so I really don't like to do them in proper studios, and I also think it's a huge waste of time and money to do them in proper studios because they're so easily done at home. So part of the joy of having a room of my own is I have got now for the first time in my life, is that I can do all that kind of embarrassing stuff without fear of humiliation.

*(A cappella group vocals: "The book you left by your bed")*

Laura: And I like close weird harmonies. I like harmonies that sound like they're possibly gonna be out of tune and then they sort of resolve in a nice way.

*(A cappella harmonized vocals: "That will outlive the dead")*

Laura: And also, there's a line that I took from a Robertson Davies book, who's a Canadian writer. He had a line about one of his characters dying from a kiss from God. And what he meant by that was like beautiful, excessive curiosity killed her.

*(A cappella harmonized vocals: "You wished for a kiss / You mourned in your child")*

Laura: Your excessive curiosity is this beautiful part of being youthful. And no matter how much one might want to protect the youth from letting that curiosity put them in the path of danger, there is no way you can protect them from that.

*(Third verse vocals along with acoustic guitar and backing vocals: "So you wished for a kiss from God / You mourned in your childish loss / Innocence gone but it's not / [ooh]")*

Laura: If you're looking to flesh out sort of emotional points of a song, if you're in my genre of music, you either do that with backing vocals [laughter] or with strings. So there's a lot of choral backing vocals and beautiful strings by Rob Moose and he is a very familiar sound to lots of people now because he's done Bon Iver, Anohni, Paul Simon. So I had put these kind of very elementary string pads on the demo as the kind of point of reference of where I might imagine strings coming in, and sort of where they might be useful. And then I sent it to Rob and I said, "Oh, we're on a bit of a tight deadline, as we always are, and a tight budget, as we always are, and would you do this in the cheapest, quickest way you possibly can?" And he sent back to us a message saying, "I hope you don't mind, but the approach that I took was embodying the daughter, the character of the daughter."

*(Strings)*

Laura: "I sort of envisioned her rising up above you and being this effective presence in the song."

*(Strings continue)*

Laura: He'd done such an incredibly empathetic job. It just, I listened to it, you know, on those huge speakers at the desk in the studio and I burst into floods and floods of tears. I couldn't believe it.

*(Strings fade out)*

Laura: I've always been interested in the feminine relationship to creativity, and why in a kind of societal sense, it might have been inhibited over time. And I think traumatic experience answers a lot of those questions, because I think it takes a long time to get back to a space that's very good for writing or creativity in any kind way. You feel safe enough to be vulnerable. So for me, I wanted to end the song with a kind of triumphant and hopeful idea that you will cut that down, whatever those seeds bear, can be cut down and started again.

*(Third verse full track, including the strings: "Innocence gone but it's not forgot / You'll get your way through it somehow")*

*(Piano)*

Laura: You know, this is all stuff that I wish I had known. And I don't feel like I learned it the hard way. I feel like I learned it the way, that people learn it. But I certainly wish I had had more of a sense of ownership over my boundaries. And I wish I'd stood up for myself in certain situations or confronted certain situations in a different way. And I wish that the culture had been there to, on a foundational level, prepare me for that. I address things in the song as if they were things to be prepared for, I guess. But the sentiment really is that the experiences are inevitable, but how you handle them is up to you.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Song for Our Daughter,” by Laura Marling, in its entirety.

*(“Song for Our Daughter” by LAURA MARLING)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Laura Marling. You’ll also find the link to stream or buy this song.

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