

**Song Exploder**  
**Lianne La Havas - Can't Fight**  
**Episode 206**

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.

*("Can't Fight" by LIANNE LA HAVAS)*

Hrishikesh: Lianne La Havas is a singer and songwriter from London. She's been nominated for a Grammy and a Brit award, and in 2020, she released her third album. In this episode, she breaks down her song "Can't Fight," and traces its evolution - along with her own evolution - over several years.

Lianne: My name is Lianne La Havas.

*(Music fades out)*

Lianne: The idea first came into my head about seven or eight years ago. My boyfriend at the time was a bass player and he was showing me all these videos of different bass players that he liked. And Victor Wooten came up, and this song he had called "Me & My Bass Guitar."

*("Me & My Bass Guitar" by VICTOR WOOTEN)*

Lianne: It's just the most amazing use of the bass. So basically my boyfriend was teaching me a version of it that could be played on guitar. So I was having loads of fun like playing the guitar in a new way. Then yeah I remember just sitting alone, as I do in my house with a cup of tea and I just started playing a nice chord that I liked. But I had the muscle memory from learning this Victor Wooten piece. So then a sort of hammer-on, percussive riff started happening with the chord that I liked.

*(Guitar riff)*

Lianne: When I write a guitar part, it can't be anything that doesn't challenge me. Because I like feeling that challenge when I'm singing and playing. It kind of evokes writing in me. It makes me more likely to want to write to something.

*(Guitar riff fades out)*

Lianne: I started playing guitar when I was 18 years old, so just over 13 years ago now. The only reason I didn't learn guitar as an actual child was because I didn't believe, from what I saw, that any girls were playing guitar. It was mostly boys that I saw playing guitar. So that made me not wanna do it, but I saw girls playing piano and it felt accessible to me, and so that became my hobby, and my outlet. And then it wasn't until 18 inspired by women, playing guitar, I just, I wanted to learn everything. And it just made me really love it so much. You know I remember when I figured out the first rhythm that I learned, I just remember being so deeply satisfied in a new way. I said, if I can do that with this rhythm, it means I can do that with another rhythm and another one and another one. So as I started writing more and more songs, I used to try and look for a new rhythm for every song that I wrote, so that none of them would be the same.

*(Guitar riff resumes)*

Lianne: I don't like waste, if there's a piece of guitar or melody or some words that haven't been used yet in something, then I've got this idea that I'm gonna use everything up before I make a new thing. But basically, it was just that one chord, just something I play when I'm practicing or when I'm warming up because it just feels nice under the fingers. And it stayed like that for all these years [laughter] until I was in a session with Mura Masa and it was just figuring out where we should start.

*(Guitar riff ends)*

Lianne: Mura Masa, or Alex, is a wonderful chap. I discovered his music five years ago, and I was like, who the hell is that? That's amazing. I love the sound. I love the rhythm. So I just asked to meet him. And I ended up doing a session with him. And there was like immediate trust. And when I played him that riff, that's when he said, "Oh, we should record that. We should make something out of that." So he took my guitar and then started overdubbing another part on top of my riff. The bit that goes

*(Lianne sings the bassline)*

Lianne: or something like that.

*(Bass along with the guitar riff)*

Lianne: I guess he found the bassline, and when he did that it signaled what the rest of the chords should be, and that's what made it a verse. It's as simple as that, because for seven years I had had that riff not knowing what to do with it but as soon as you put a couple of bass notes on it, it turns it into another thing. So I was finally able to stand outside of it and work with it.

*(Bass along with guitar riff end)*

Lianne: The chords on the chorus stand out

*(Chorus guitar arpeggios)*

Lianne: because one of them was a chord that I had just learnt. And this chord is my new favorite chord. It's the first chord of that.

*(Chorus guitar arpeggios continue)*

Lianne: I don't know the name of it. This is my big, dirty secret that I'm hiding. I'm sorry, jazz police.

*(Chorus guitar arpeggios end)*

Lianne: I'm sorry. Now I'm just thinking about all of the jazz people who were just shouting at their phones [laughter], telling me what this chord is. Please send me a tweet @LianneLaHavas. Thank you.

*(Chorus guitar arpeggios resume)*

Lianne: It just feels like a huge relief, meeting someone like Alex. When you meet someone who gets you, it's just a really big deal. I remember doing the chorus and the melody, we were even sort of accidentally both singing the same thing in the same place.

*(Vocal mumbles along with chorus guitar arpeggios and strings)*

Lianne: I think the first time I thought about lyrics was probably when we were humming to ourselves, getting the track into a good place to be sung on. But at the time of writing this song, I was going through - I'm just gonna say it - I was in a very toxic relationship. And it was very hard for me in a lot of ways. I just felt a bit powerless, in many respects.

*(Chorus guitar arpeggios)*

Lianne: It took a lot of my energy. It took a lot of my confidence away. And there was definitely a lot of uncertainty, whether we would stay together or whether we wouldn't, or basically I tried to leave many times and couldn't or for whatever reason, it was very hard and I would always go back, but this is the kind of beginning of noticing, "hang on. Something is terribly wrong here. Why do I feel so helpless? Why am I always anxious?" And I guess this song was like the last inkling of the positive, like when I was still looking at it through rose tinted lenses, when, to me, in my head, it wasn't as toxic as it actually was. I had some space basically when I had this session with Alex. Safe space, I guess, you know, I didn't have anything to prove to anyone. So the concept of "Can't fight," it was like, there's still a part of me that thinks of it fondly. And perhaps I should give it one more chance. And so that is basically where the premise came from for the rest of the lyric.

*(Chorus lead vocals: "I can't fight away this love / I knew that I should give you up / I tried to run but got my heart stuck / I can't fight away this love / Can't fight away this love")*

Lianne: Alex and I felt pretty good about it and we just sort of knew when to leave it. But this song for me was one of those curveball ones. Basically I felt like the melody was quite, for lack of a better term, poppy [laughter]. It felt quite accessible more than I'm maybe comfortable with, and that is something I had to accept. That I was the creator of this melody and these chords therefore it's okay that they've come out this way. I went through this phase of not listening to it. And then I went through a phase of not being able to stop listening to it.

*(Guitar arpeggios)*

Lianne: I found it extremely uplifting because maybe the optimism in the music helped it to be easier to express difficult feelings. Sometimes when the music is also very melancholic and you're talking about something really dark, maybe that's too much, so part of that helped to keep it from slipping into a very despairing mood.

*(Guitar arpeggios fade out)*

Lianne: So I did the writing of the lyrics with my long time writing partner and collaborator, Mr. Matt Hales aka Aqualung. He's really good at helping me flesh

things out and make them a real thing. And I brought him these recordings and I said, "OK, here's the vague outline." And I explained everything to Matt. I said, "well, we broke up again. And then we got back together again." And we just wrote all the words and recorded it all at real-world studios.

*(First verse lead vocals: "It seems that I won't be warned / And certainly, I saw a sign / I raged like a woman scorned")*

Lianne: The lyrics are quite serious, you know, it's like, "seems like I won't be warned, and certainly I saw a sign. I raged like a woman scorned." After I had broken up again, that one felt more final, it wasn't final, but it was just enough to capture the essence of how I was feeling at the time.

*(Second verse lead vocals along with snaps: "The things that I want and need / But they always seem to be at odds with me / Oh why? / When did Heaven get this heavy? / Everything's right until it's wrong / But something about you feels like home / Oh baby, you know that you got me gone / You're pulling me back and now I'm going under, oh")*

Lianne: I was saying exactly how I felt but singing it in this way that made it feel good for me. I was very much over it, but the chorus had already been written. So we kept the "Can't Fight Away This Love," and it just made sense, the getting back together and the back and forth. 'Cause it wasn't over. I knew it wasn't really over at that point.

*(Chorus group vocals: "I can't fight away this love / I knew that I should give you up / I tried to run but got my heart stuck / I can't fight away this love / Can't fight away this love")*

Lianne: In the summer after that, I did finally say goodbye and I was in a new headspace.

*(Guitar riff along with some drums samples)*

Lianne: It's like as soon as I made that decision for good, things started getting done, and I felt really good about everything and confident and capable. So I got my band involved, my bass player and drummer. Our approach was to keep it very minimal to begin with. And we tried just adding a few little clicky rim shot things, but it was during the moment where my drummer was getting ready to do his take. He was playing a really great beat.

*(Drum beat)*

Lianne        Just in that moment before you press record, and I was like, “wait, that's it. That's the beat.”

*(Drum beat along with the guitar arpeggios)*

Lianne:        The strings were arranged by a lovely chap named DaVita.

*(Strings)*

Lianne:        In the original demo, there are these programmed harps that I did with Mura Masa, but that ended up not quite fitting. So we wanted something to fill that space. I think it brings a really nice drama and a seriousness to it, a sort of sophistication just for the final part of the song.

*(Strings along with chorus group vocals: “I can't fight away this love / I knew that I should give you up / I tried to run but got my heart stuck / I can't fight away this love / Can't fight away this love”)*

Lianne:        Now that I know what I know about the nature of toxic relationships and abusive relationships, it's very obvious to me now, why certain things happened. And, you know, why I may have behaved that way. But no, at the time I just thought I needed to try harder.

*(Guitar arpeggios)*

Lianne:        I have forgiven myself, but the girl in the song, it makes me want to pick her up and shake her. If only you'd known what you know now, but at the same time, if I did, that song wouldn't exist [laughter] and I wouldn't have had all the pleasure I got from making it, none of that would exist either. This was my way of making it beautiful. That's why I don't think any ideas are useless or should be thrown away. Any sessions that I do that maybe weren't fruitful. I don't think that they were unnecessary because it made me learn something. The happiest that I ever am is when I'm making songs. So strangely, this process for me was one of the happiest times of my entire life. But what it's about is almost certainly the darkest time in my entire life.

*(Group vocals along with drum samples)*

Lianne: But music offered me that pleasurable, safe space where I could be confident, and I could be myself.

*(Group vocals along with drum samples end)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Can't Fight," by Lianne La Havas, in its entirety.

*("Can't Fight" by LIANNE LA HAVAS)*

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "Can't Fight," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). And if you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). You can also follow the show on Twitter and Instagram @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.