

**Song Exploder**  
**Liz Phair - Divorce Song**  
**Episode 135**

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

*("Divorce Song" by LIZ PHAIR)*

Hrishikesh: In 1993, Liz Phair released her debut album, *Exile in Guyville*. It was an instant hit, critically and commercially. It sold hundreds of thousands of copies. *Spin* and *The Village Voice* named it Album of the Year. And soon after, *Rolling Stone* put her on the cover of their magazine. Now, twenty-five years later, *Exile in Guyville* is being reissued as a deluxe box set with new photos, essays, and Liz Phair's original four-track cassette recordings. In this episode, Liz and *Exile in Guyville*'s producer, Brad Wood, look back to tell the story of the creation of one of the songs on the album, "Divorce Song."

*("Divorce Song" by LIZ PHAIR)*

Liz: I'm Liz Phair.

*(Music fades)*

Liz: I don't remember when I wrote "Divorce Song," but I remember the evening that inspired it. I must have been a sophomore or junior in college? I was dating a guy at Oberlin. It was one of those things where we were friends but we were kind of hooking up so it was like a non-defined kind of relationship, and he had this little blue Miata, which stood out on campus, like, you know, everyone wanted to ride in [laughter] Shane's Miata [laughter], you know, like nobody had that in the middle of Ohio. And one night, we went for a ride in the Miata, and I think we drove through cornfields. The way that evening ends is we were thinking about stopping at, like, a motel, and I think we actually went in and discussed getting a motel room [laughter], and then I think we were like, "Nah." So it was kind of like this night where I didn't know how I felt about him, I didn't know how he felt about me, but we had a really good time together. And I wanted to write about all the little in between moments that people have with a relationship, where you disagree about things, just the ordinary things that

happen that if you're in that relationship, are incredibly dramatic, and they mean so much. I wrote pretty quickly, I always felt it was really important to take that kernel of raw emotion, and grab it, capture it. So I was writing all these little songs. But I didn't record it until long after college. I literally wouldn't play them for anyone. I wouldn't show them, record them, nothing. And I wrote with no amplification mostly. I didn't want anyone to hear, so I would play on an electric guitar with my head bent over so I could hear the strings, and I think that's why my chords are interesting, because when you're just playing them with no amplification, it might sound very good. And then when you stick it through an amplifier, you can hear every note, the ones that are dissonant, as well as the ones that sound good.

*(Guitar)*

Liz: That was a learning process, how to get over the fact that I wrote these things virtually silently.

*(Guitar fades)*

Liz: I had a four track, a microphone, an electric guitar, and a little Peavey amp. Four tracks are pretty basic, that was what appealed to me about them. You just stick the cassette in, press play and record. I would go to the house of my parents' friends who were out of town and I would swap, watering their plants and taking their dog out or something, to be able to set up a little recording studio in their home. I didn't want my parents to hear the words that I was singing either like that was another thing I had to cover up. I was saying some pretty raunchy stuff in the lyrics, so it was important that I just felt un-self-conscious.

*(Vocals with guitar: "And when I asked for a separate room / It was late at night, and we'd been driving since noon")*

*(Guitar fades)*

Liz: I didn't work very hard on it, because I thought I was a visual artist who just happened to write songs on the side. I didn't think I was a musician. So I put all my professionalism into my visual art, and very little of it into my music. And I think that allowed me to not overwork something, and I knew that that was a tendency of mine, from visual art. I had ruined so many drawings just by overworking them. So I pretty much let the music be quick, it was spontaneous. I didn't second guess myself a lot.

Hrishikesh: Liz Phair used the name Girly-Sound for these recordings.

Liz: Girly-Sound was an art provocative piece in my mind. This is learned from Oberlin, that the young female voice carries the least authority in society. And so, I wanted to see if you had a little girl voice, which I sort of did, what you could get away with saying. Would anyone listen, would they care, would it matter if you said really shocking things in a really girlish voice, because you think of like the most innocent things. You think of, you know, sunny day, little girls, you know, and like I just wanted to completely upend that. Because having been a little girl, I know that they are devilish and fascinating and conniving little creatures. Like they are fully prepared to participate [laughter] in society, just maybe not always given the chance.

*(Vocals with guitar: "And you put in my hands a loaded gun / And then told me not to fire it / When you did the things you said were up to me / And then accused me of trying to fuck it up / You've never been a waste of my time / It's never been a drag")*

*(Guitar)*

Liz: So I made one cassette of songs and two copies. And that was it.

*(Guitar fades)*

Brad: Hi, I'm Brad Wood. I heard the Girly-Sound tapes. That was at John Henderson's apartment. John Henderson lived in Chicago like we all did, and ran a couple of small indie labels, put out some really cool music. And he'd mentioned that there's this woman he wants to put a record out with. And I was running a recording studio up a block from where he lived.

Liz: John Henderson, he ran his label from that apartment, and he let me live there, because I wanted to get out of my parents' house, and he gave me like super cheap rent, and I think his idea was that I would help put like CDs in the [laughter], like I was going to help mail, because like I have this flashback memory of him, instructing me how to do that, but then I also have a memory that I never did that [laughter].

Brad: I walked down to Hendy's house, and Liz had already gone to sleep, and John played 8 or 9 songs. I remember "Divorce Song," specifically, and that song resonated with me more than any other song she's written. I just was struck by

the lyrics, and the unusual chord structure. And I'll never forget walking home with like this nervous calculation, how can I help make this happen, like this is it. I was going to be the engineer for that session, and he wanted to book time at the studio with some musicians. I'd be the drummer and the engineer. And that's really how we proceeded initially. John made it clear that he and Liz were going to produce it, or just he.

Liz: John, he was such a music head, and he did play all this great music. He was constantly like, "Listen to this, listen to this, and listen to this." You know, this is another feature of Guyville. Guys were constantly lecturing me about what good music was and like what band I should listen to. And it was just like constant school. He was really adamant in the studio about what he wanted to do, and what he didn't want to do, and I felt suddenly, what I hadn't really cared about before, I felt like he was taking too much ownership over it. And I didn't like at all the sensation of him telling me what could and couldn't be on my songs. And I kind of woke up like I didn't react until the song itself was being manipulated by someone who was essentially telling me that he knew better than I did. And that triggered something in me.

Brad: And I do have a really strong memory of not feeling that the music that we were recording was syncing up with your songs very well.

Liz: You know, I'd been working in visual art for a long time. I wasn't naive to the ways of being creative. I was just naive to the ways of making music. And this thing just sort of like, this defiant person came up out of me that was like, "No. Now you're fucking with my shit." I could have and should have noticed that ahead of time. I just wasn't paying attention. So I split with John Henderson, and I didn't want to do it anymore. I don't think he wanted to do it either. I think I was not the Eliza Doolittle he was hoping for, you know? Like I was a feral little beast that was like not learning, you know like [laughter]. And I was fine with that, I'm like, "Yeah, that's right!" [laughter] You know?

Brad: I was disappointed that we weren't going to record anymore. So I called John and asked if I could get a number for Liz, and I called her at her parent's house. Eventually we did connect enough to agree to record again.

Liz: My songs from *Girly-Sound*, I *never* thought about recording them in the studio, I *never* thought about what they would sound like. I think that's why I chose to use a template. In my mind, I was thinking like an academic. If you don't know how to make a record, pick the very best record and then deconstruct it, figure

out how they did what they did, study it, learn from the greats, and then do your own interpretation of that. So the template that I went with was sort of the most

*("Rocks Off" by ROLLING STONES)*

Liz: audacious template, which was *Exile on Main Street*, the Rolling Stones double album.

*("Rocks Off" by ROLLING STONES)*

Liz: It was a presumptuous thing to say like, "Oh I'm going to do my song-by-song response to the greatest record of all time."

*(Music fades)*

Liz: That's when I started making charts where I had like all of my songs next to all of their songs. In a lot of ways, it let me feel like I was in control of something that I really wasn't, that I really didn't know what I was doing. It gave me a focus for my nervous energy. And "Ventilator Blues" is the corresponding song to "Divorce Song."

*("Ventilator Blues" by ROLLING STONES)*

Liz: And what I got from that song was tension, and everyone's got to release the tension. "Ventilator Blues," like things get, like, so intense and people just keep slogging through life.

*("Ventilator Blues" by ROLLING STONES)*

*(Music ends)*

Liz: So, with "Divorce Song," it's a lyrical corresponding thing. That was like what it is when you're in a relationship, you're just slogging through together. There are times that you blow up and fight with each other, and it doesn't have to mean it's the end of the relationship, necessarily, you just have to ventilate. So we had a lot of choices to make: what arrangement do you put on just a guitar and a vocal?

Brad: There was no clear idea for most of the songs initially what was going to be hung on it, and so I specifically wanted to make sure that the song sounded good as just guitar and voice.

*(Guitar)*

Brad: When Liz first came in the studio, we plugged into different guitar amps to see what worked. And Liz was most comfortable playing through her Peavey backstage, which is an inexpensive,

Liz: Portable!

Brad: portable, small, little amp.

Liz: I do remember there was like a tussle about the Peavey amp and I just didn't want to let go of it. The Liz doll came complete with a set and you had to figure out how to make something tasteful.

*(Guitar)*

Brad: It has this bizarre reverb on it.

*(Guitar)*

Brad: But what we would do is put it through a chorus pedal,

*(Guitar)*

Brad: that has a stereo output, so one cable would come out and go into Liz's Peavey amp, and then we'd plug in a second amp. So she would play one guitar part through two amplifiers and then we could pan it left, right.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar ends)*

Liz: I remember sitting there and you would solo my vocal for some technical reason.

*(Vocals: "And when I asked for a separate room / It was late at night, and we'd been driving since noon")*

Liz: And when I first heard my voice back over the big speakers, I wanted to *die*. Every second that that vocal was up there in that room, I was sitting on the couch like in a state of seizure.

Brad: So, on this song, in particular, Liz at least sang 2 times.

*(Vocals: "I would have stayed in your bed for the rest of my life / Just to prove I was right / That it's harder to be friends than lovers")*

Liz: I think my voice was too thin, and when you double a vocal track, any mistakes, any foibles will just sort of get lost in the wash.

Brad: But when I mixed it, we only used the double just on the choruses. At that time, I had more confidence in her singing ability than she had, you know, I was going to sort of push my agenda, and my agenda with this song specifically was that a song so harrowing lyrically, that's painting such a bleak picture, that unfortunately all of us probably, at some time, experience whether it's divorce or just a relationship dying, I thought that it was best communicated in as stark a setting as possible.

*(Vocals: "But when you said that I wasn't worth talking to / I had to take your word on that")*

*(Drums)*

Brad: I had really specific ideas for the rhythm parts for this song. And a lot of that comes from Liz's guitar style. She does a lot of accents off the beat, doesn't play on the downbeat.

*(Guitar)*

Brad: The really obvious thing to do would be to play a drum pattern that hits those accents. But I'd been taught, never overplay.

*(Drums join)*

*(Guitar ends)*

Brad: One of the things that Rolling Stones are so good at is Charlie Watts' drumming.

Liz: It's very vivid to me, you extolling the virtues of Charlie Watts.

Brad: And so, with "Divorce Song," I wanted to have an element that complimented and pushed further the accented strumming that Liz does on that song. And that's where the percussion comes in.

*(Percussion joins)*

*(Drums end)*

Brad: What makes "Divorce Song" sound like a Stones song in my mind is that it's got shakers and cabasa playing this odd accent.

*(Percussion)*

Brad: And everytime I hear that start, it sounds like Jimmy Miller, the producer of the Stones playing the cowbell on "Honky Tonk Women."

*("Honky Tonk Women" by ROLLING STONES)*

Brad: The whole song starts out with a cowbell. And then Charlie comes in with the beat [mimics the drum beat].

*("Honky Tonk Women" by ROLLING STONES)*

Brad: That's what makes a Stones song for so many people, it's the thing that you would hear first. And we don't have to have a bunch of big rock guitars and bluesy chords, you just need some of these very essential, it's like the whiff of, it's like a vapor of, of a Rolling Stones essence, you know.

Liz: Yeah, you just sort of like spritz in the air and you walk through it.

Brad: [laughter] Yeah.

Liz: [Laughter]

*(Music fades)*

Liz: All the wicked guitar parts on *Guyville* are Casey Rice. Casey Rice, to me, was like the full rock flavor. He was your engineer, correct?



Brad: Yes, Casey was an engineer at the studio, he'd started I think that year, '92 or late '91. And Casey Rice plays smoking leads.

Liz: Smoking leads.

Brad: He doesn't play for the entire song, just waits, waits for two and a half minutes. And then we rock it out, Casey's guitar comes in.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar ends)*

Liz: Part of what I loved about recording *Guyville* is that people dropped by to see Brad all the time.

Brad: People would drop by to see Casey Rice.

Liz: Either way, there was like a nice, it was a nice way to record because there was always like new people that just might show up, you don't know who was coming to the studio that night while you were working.

Brad: And so, John Casey "Awesome" is the harmonica player. I think John Casey "Awesome" was a friend of Casey's. So John Casey "Awesome" came into play, and we said, "Can you play harmonica on this?" He said, "Sure, I can play harmonica on whatever you want." And we just recorded one take from the beginning of the song to the end, he just blew his brains out, just kept going and going and going.

*(Harmonica)*

*(Guitar joins)*

Liz: Yeah he's playing like full velocity the entire song.

Brad: Never stopped for a second [laughter].

Liz: He never stopped and he's like, at 11 the entire time. And at the end, the outro, he really was killing it, so we're like, that's all we do.

Brad: All we used was the outro,

Liz: [laughter]

Brad: and that's the only part of the song where, me on drums, I go to an open hi-hat and play a more traditional drum beat, and we rock it out.

*(Harmonica with guitar and drums)*

*(Music ends)*

Brad: I'm playing bass on the song.

*(Bass)*

*(Bass ends)*

Brad: After the second chorus, it comes back to a very short verse, and she sings

*(Vocals: "And the license said you had to stick around until I was dead / But if you're tired of looking at my face, I guess I already am")*

Brad: And that's the only time, I think, on the song that references a marriage, references a contract which is being broken, and hence the title, "Divorce Song," and I play way up the neck on the bass,

*(Bass)*

Brad: and abandon all the rhythm,

*(Bass)*

Brad: and everything clears out for this short period.

*(Vocals with bass: "But if you're tired of looking at my face, I guess I already am")*

Brad: I wanted the bass to be fragile, because Liz wasn't going to be fragile, she's brave enough to sing these words. I wanted something musical to be delicate, and so have it be the big, beefy bass that suddenly just goes up the neck and decides to just be fragile.

*(Bass)*

*(Bass ends)*

Liz: When you're in a car with someone, that's a pretty intimate environment. It's ripe for awkward interaction. And for me, "Divorce Song," the entire thing is about that tension in that kind of, "You're looking at him, he's looking at you, you're both having totally different thoughts about each other." And yet you're like, stuck in this small confined space together.

*(Guitar)*

Liz: I had a fatalist's view of love at that point. I felt like things often fell apart and it was hard to keep a relationship together. "Divorce Song" is really about micro moments, where you really want something to work out but you find your mouth speaking words as if it's not going to. Like you dare not hope, and you have these, like, sensitive feelings for someone. And yet you're sort of outwardly convincing yourself and everyone around you that it's probably not going to work out, it doesn't really matter. I didn't make these songs to start a career, I made these songs because they were my way of understanding the world,

*(Bass joins)*

Liz: they were my therapy.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Divorce Song," by Liz Phair, in its entirety.

*("Divorce Song" by LIZ PHAIR)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Liz Phair and producer Brad Wood. You'll also find links to buy the song and the 25th anniversary box set. This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Special thanks to Mac Burrus. The illustrations on the Song Exploder website are by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of the shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. You can also find all the past

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