

**Song Exploder**  
**Lykke Li - I Follow Rivers**  
**Episode 216**

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.

*("I Follow Rivers" by LYKKE LI)*

Hrishikesh: Lykke Li is a singer and songwriter from Sweden. She started releasing music in 2007, and for most of it, she's worked with producer Björn Yttling, who's also a member of the Swedish band, Peter Björn and John. Her second album, *Wounded Rhymes*, came out 10 years ago. It was named one of the best albums of 2011 by *The New York Times*, *Pitchfork*, *The Guardian*, and more, and it won the Swedish Grammy for Best Album. The song, "I Follow Rivers," was the breakout hit from that album, and for this episode, Lykke and Björn break down how they made it, with help from co-writer Rick Nowels. I spoke to the two of them while they were at Björn's studio, Ingrid Studios in Stockholm.

*("I Follow Rivers" by LYKKE LI)*

*(Music fades)*

Hrishikesh: But before getting into the making of this song, I wanted to start a few years earlier, and find out how the two of them first started working together.

Lykke: My name is Lykke Li.

Björn: My name is Björn Yttling.

Lykke: I think I met him when I was 20. And I had done some demos that I played for this record label guy. And he told me that, "This is kind of bad. You would really need a producer." And then he put me in touch with Björn, who was quite famous in Sweden at the time, it was a very big deal. So I came to the studio and we had a very proper meeting.

Björn: She played a Wurlitzer and sang a song.

Lykke: And based on that, I guess [laughter], you thought I was weird enough to take the challenge.

Björn: I didn't really like the songs she brought, but she had something, I guess, "star quality" or something like that, you know, it had something. Maybe it had the most important thing, because you can always write a new song, that's just something to work with. But that thing that you had, it's quite hard to like, achieve if you don't have it. And also I liked your tone, of course, like in the voice.

Lykke: So then he started coaching me on how to write songs. And I really liked that ever since I was a kid, I've always been drawn to be someone's pupil. And that's how we started.

*(Guitar)*

Lykke: I remember laying on a bed in some strange hotel room or something, in New York, and we kind of had the riff, like improvising a groove.

Björn: We did a lot on me playing guitar.

Lykke: That's also me playing a really untuned autoharp.

Björn: And then, we sang on the riff there.

*(Vocals with guitar)*

*(Music fades)*

Björn: So we had it, but then we let it sit for a while [laughter].

Lykke: And then we got back to Stockholm to really figure out, you know, how to make a song from it.

Björn: It took quite a while before we even went into rehearsals, and did a lot of percussion ideas and stuff.

*(Guitar with percussion)*

*(Music fades)*

Björn: But this one wasn't really finished. It was more like we had just created the sound.

Lykke: Because I didn't love this song.

Björn: She kept it in the garbage can.

Lykke: Yeah,

Björn: [laughter]

Lykke: for quite a while.

Björn: [laughter]

Lykke: Yeah. And I think also from personal point of view, I had just gotten mega, mega heartbroken. So that was maybe the headspace, a lot of hurt and anger. And, you know, that you want to somehow triumph at the end.

Björn: And at the end of the album writing process, we had Rick Nowels coming in to write songs with us.

Hrishikesh: Rick Nowels is a Grammy-winning songwriter and member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Lykke: He had asked to work with us, and I was pretty opposed to it because we're both very protective over the craft, but I looked at his credits.

Hrishikesh: He's worked with a ton of artists over the decades, including Madonna, Adele, Tupac, John Legend and Stevie Nicks.

Lykke: And I'm a big Stevie Nicks fan. So then I was like, "Okay, why don't we, I mean, let him come. Let's see. Let's try something." And then he flew and met us in the studio here in Sweden.

Björn: And it was a good trio for like getting results fast too, because I could produce fast and I could work on lyrics. And he was really encouraging, you know. And he asked a couple of times, "So what do you think is the strongest part of the

song?" "Oh, the riff, maybe?" And then like [sings the riff]. "Oh, could we sing the riff?"

*(Vocals: "You're my river, running high")*

Lykke: "You're my river, running high / Run deep, run wild."

*(Vocals: "Run deep, run wild")*

Lykke: What is really good about Rick, from a poetic standpoint, is he always asks, "Okay, what's the title?" You paint the whole picture from there, from an emotional standpoint, which I find very, very interesting. I mean, I don't actually say, "I follow rivers," anywhere. That's just the title. I think it's more about the theme and the currents of a dark love.

*(Vocals with bass: "Oh, I beg you, can I follow? / Oh I ask you, why not always")*

Lykke: It was like I was writing from a very subconscious level about the dynamics and the archetypes of love.

*(Vocals with bass: "Be the ocean, where I unravel?")*

Björn: We put in a little guitar.

*(Bass with guitar)*

*(Cowbell)*

Lykke: I feel like the cowbell is such a strong hook in this song.

Björn: It's live played by the studio owner, actually. He was playing in an old jam rock band. So we just took two cowbells that was nicely tuned, and just taped them up a little bit, and then he played [mimics cowbell sound].

*(Cowbell)*

Björn: It was like different layers of live playing. There's a lot of live playing on the whole record.

Lykke: We both just really enjoy realness and real instrument, real playing, real moments, the imperfections that come out of that as well.

Björn: There's no synthesizer, you know, on this record.

Lykke: Yeah.

*(Distorted piano)*

Björn: The piano was mic'd up. ABBA recorded "Dancing Queen" on that piano and we distorted the shit out of it [laughter], so you can't really tell.

Lykke: It just sounds really, really cool and good. I think we both kind of have a taste for like the fucked up.

*(Processed vocals)*

Lykke: That's either me or you pitched down.

*(Processed vocals, claps, distorted piano, and bass)*

Björn: Lykke doesn't like regular snares so much

Lykke: [laughter]

Björn: or regular kicks.

Lykke: Or kicks.

Björn: [laughter] So we tried other, you know, like this is maybe a Japanese cheese drum or something, you know.

Lykke: Yeah.

*(Beat)*

Björn: We had the two drummers, Lars and John. John, in my band, and Lars that always plays with Lykke, was playing those things.

*(Tambourine with beat)*

Lykke: I feel like too, I don't know what it is. It's like, "Shh, shh, shh." Some maracas or something that's kind of thumping and, you know, you're following someone.

*(Vocals with beat: "I, I follow / I follow you, deep sea baby / I follow you / I, I follow / I follow you, dark doom honey / I follow you")*

Hrishikesh: Do you remember recording those vocals?

Lykke: I do. I'm surprised because now I feel I sing softer. I must have been really upset [laughter] about what happened. I have that kind of tone, of a broken woman.

*(Guitar)*

Lykke: You know, I'm just trying to write exactly what I'm feeling. So whenever I sing my own songs, I just go there automatically. I'm like in the emotion, I'm just, you know, 100% just feeling the lyric and the subtext. Because I'm not also a very good singer, it's not like I can do very much. So, for me, it's just about being as honest as possible.

*(Vocal pad)*

Björn: Some plugin sort of broke and kept Lykke's vocals just for infinity.

*(Vocal pad)*

Björn: And we'd be like, in studios, "What is that?" Like, "Record it! Record it!" You know recorded that, before we turned it off and it was never, you could never create that again. So it was sort of like a big rug of Lykke's vocals from the whole song, so it was like, "Oh, that's the sound that we need for the intro."

Lykke: You know, like it's sirens, calling you out to the bottom of the ocean.

*(Vocal pad)*

Lykke: Because it's about being with a person that is pretty destructive and you know that they are going some other place. It's about intimacy in a way too, you know. If someone has those types of hidden doors and rooms that they always go towards, and I'm standing there and I just want to be close.

Hrishikesh: Even if that means being self-destructive yourself?

Lykke: Yeah. Unfortunately at that time, yes.

*(Organ)*

Lykke: The thing is also when you are an artist, it's a bit dangerous because you are kind of really interested in going to those deep places that make you feel so much, where everything is so heightened, and cinematic, and dramatic. So you kind of see the poetry in those situations in maybe a bad way. But at the same time, all movies, paintings, books, poetry, songs, are all made by a bunch of love addicts. Your integrity's a bit, you know, you do everything for the art or for that feeling. And for me, that is the most precious, magical thing about writing songs, is just tapping in and watching it unfold and not being in the way or caught up, just letting it flow like a river.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Follow Rivers," by Lykke Li, in its entirety.

*("I Follow Rivers" by LYKKE LI)*

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream, "I Follow Rivers," and you can watch the music video for it.

This episode was produced by me with editing help from Teeny Lieberson and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, production assistance from Chloe Parker, 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). You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.