

**Song Exploder**  
**Maggie Rogers - Alaska**  
**Episode 115**

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.

*("Alaska" by MAGGIE ROGERS)*

Hrishikesh: Maggie Rogers had a breakthrough moment when she was a student at NYU's Clive Davis Institute. Pharrell Williams visited her class, and when he heard her song "Alaska," his reaction was dramatic, and caught on video. The video of Pharrell listening to Maggie's song went viral, and "Alaska" became a hit, with over 40 million streams on Spotify alone. Maggie Rogers is now playing sold out shows across the country, just a year after graduating from college. In this episode, Maggie tells the story of what came before that day in class; all the steps and missteps that eventually led to her writing the song "Alaska."

*("Alaska" by MAGGIE ROGERS)*

Maggie: My name is Maggie Rogers, and I'm very excited to be on Song Exploder.

*(Music fades)*

Maggie: I grew up writing music, and grew up producing my own music, and this is something that I've always done. I played banjo and made folk music, and grew up in this rural place, and identified myself in that culture.

*("James" by MAGGIE ROGERS)*

Maggie: You know, I grew up in a really rural area in Maryland, and moved to New York when I was 18. I went to the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at Tisch School of the Arts at NYU for college, to study engineering, production, and the music industry. And, I think, because I was suddenly starting to learn about engineering and production, and the way that it is, like, properly done, it made me really question the way I'd always just done it like at home. And it made me a little bit insecure, and I didn't really know what to do.

*(Music ends)*

Maggie: After my freshman year of college, I went on a hiking trip to Alaska. It was a month long, it was a program called NOLS, where I was training to be an outdoor guide. And I didn't see another person, other than the group I was hiking with, for a month. Alaska was really hard, and that actually was kind of amazing. But when I got back from Alaska, I went through an awful period of writer's block. And it was really crippling because music was sort of always the way that I've identified myself, and my thoughts, and my personality outwardly. I've always known what I'm interested in, and what I'm feeling because of the way my music sounds. And so, suddenly there was no music, and I felt super lost, and it was really weird. And I didn't also feel like I was a folk musician anymore. During those two and a half years, I definitely tried making music a couple times and made some of the worst music I've ever made. Whenever I had a homework assignment, I'd like, you know, you'd have to make like, "Make a minute of music," and whenever I wouldn't feel like getting emotional and writing a real song, I would just make these like holiday raps.

*(Holiday rap)*

*(Music fades)*

Maggie: It was just awful, not being able to remember what it was like to make music. And like wondering how I always did this, and thinking, *Was this just something I was good at when I was a teenager? If that's true, I'm screwed because I've based my entire life around this thing I love to do and like, maybe it's not there anymore.* So I decided to work in journalism for a little while, and it made me miserable. Doing something else, and committing, and trying to have another job made me so unhappy and it made me realize, "Oh, I'm actually really passionate about this other thing." I was like, "Alright, I'm not going to be scared of this anymore. I'm going to really give this a shot. And then at least I'll know if I'm capable of this or not." To graduate from the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at NYU, you must complete a thesis. And part of, I think, what helped break the writer's block, is that I was going to school for this, and I had a final project to turn in, and I was going to fail. So, I had to turn something in. I like was in trouble [laughter]. So I studied abroad in Paris during my junior year, and it was nice because suddenly I wasn't going to music school. The pressure had been lifted a little bit, and I just, like, studied art and literature. And some of my best friends from NYU are native Berliners, so I went to visit them, and that was the first time I heard house music.

*(House music)*

Maggie: When I got to college at NYU, you know, when I'd hear about "the club," it was always referencing like sort of West Village, High-end girls wear high heels, there's expensive cocktails. I always thought that that's what dance music was, which I totally see the glamor and allure of, but it just, it didn't really feel like something I was interested in. So we were in Berlin, and I remember my best friend Lea, when she said "club," I was like, "I don't know dude, I don't know if that's for me." But we're getting dressed, and she said, "You have to wear sneakers or else they're not going to let you in." And when she said that to me, I was like, "Okay, I'm interested. Like, what does this mean?"

*(House music)*

Maggie: Hearing house music was amazing. Because what I love about folk music so much is that it has a sense of place, it's really intimate, but it's also really primal. And it's as ancient as human culture. But also, so is dancing. I was sort of looking around the room at this club and watching everybody move, and realizing that it was one of the most primal ways we interact with music. And it was this incredible, emotional release. It felt like a form of mental health to go dancing. I felt so much better about everything, and also so much unity and community with everybody reacting to the same pulse in the same way. I'd never thought before to listen to an 11 minute house song, but I started to understand that 11 minute format as the same meditation as walking. And that was the click.

*(Music ends)*

Maggie: Also, I didn't identify with the pop world, but all of college, I had the same roommate. She was like, "Mags, if you're going to tell me that you don't like pop music, you need to look at your face every time this Carly Rae Jepsen record comes on." And I was like, "Oh shit, she's totally right, I think I love pop music [laughter]." And I do. I love pop music. So I was like, "Okay, all of these elements are pointing me to the fact that maybe I can just make music that sounds like me, and I don't have to worry about where I fit in." When I decided, "Okay what does it sound like if I try and make pop music?" I said to myself, "This would be way more fun if I was doing this with friends. I've never co-produced something before, I've always just produced my own music. I wonder what would come out of me if I was working with other people." The first person I sought out was

somebody who's a couple years above me named Doug Schadt, and I really admired his work ethic, and his ability, and mostly I just like to hang out with Doug. We were sitting in the studio, just talking, and suddenly I had this drum loop in my head, and I stopped us in the middle of conversation and said, "Hey, hey, hey, hey. Record this." So he recorded me patting on my jeans,

*(Beat)*

Maggie: A pair of Levi's 501s [laughter], and that started the session. And then I said, "Give me another track." And I start snapping.

*(Snaps join)*

Maggie: And then we added this.

*(Percussion)*

Maggie: Doug dropped in this like sample that he had of this conga pattern.

*(Percussion)*

Maggie: And then melody.

*(Vocals join: "Moving slowly through westward water / Over glacial plains")*

Maggie: The melody, for me, is so sing-song-y. It's like a folk melody. And just happened. There was no chords. But, you know, a melody coming out of nowhere, it's not nowhere. It took me two and a half years to make that melody. Not actively but it was this, all of this was just like running around up there somewhere. And then, they just like hit the paper, and I pick up the pen, and all the lyrics come out. And that's exactly what happened. It was this like creative outpouring after all of this writer's block. And I just knew that like I wanted to pick up where I left off. I mean, for me, songwriting is about storytelling, and I knew that I had couple years to cover. I started where I left off in Alaska. I was walking in this place.

*(Vocals: "I was walking through icy streams / That took my breath away")*

Maggie: But the song is not about the state of Alaska. That was like, and probably still to this day is, one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. But it's more about

everything I was processing during the process of walking through Alaska. The thing I love about walking so much is that you find a rhythm.

*(Beat)*

Maggie: Sort of like dancing. You find your step. I find dancing and hiking to be both incredibly meditative.

*(Vocals with beat: "And I walked off you / And I walked off an old me")*

Maggie: The pre-chorus line, specifically, "And I walked off you, I walked off an old me," that came from something I just use to explain this period of time to people. I would say, "This happened to me. This happened to me. And then I went to Alaska, and I just walked it all off." So [laughter] I just did the same thing in the song. I just wrote exactly what I had been like, telling people the whole time. The lyrics to "Alaska," there's no, like, hidden meaning. It is like the most direct, literal account of things that happened to me [laughter]. Like I was walking in this place, I suddenly felt like I had this transition, and the beginning of my sophomore year, I cut all my hair off. It's just like, yeah, that's totally what happened.

*(Vocals: "Cut my hair so I could rock back and forth / Without thinking of you")*

Maggie: This song, it starts out in past tense. "I was walking," and in the pre-chorus, "And I walked off you," but then the course is in the present tense.

*(Vocals: "And now, breathe deep / I'm inhaling / You and I, there's air in between")*

Maggie: So it's just going back and forth between past tense and present tense, because I was reflecting on this experience.

*(Vocals: "Leave me be / I'm exhaling / You and I, there's air in between")*

Maggie: There are so many sections of "ooh's" in this song that like those function very frequently as the main synth.

*(Vocals: "Oooh")*

Maggie: When we were recording the vocals, I was just standing at the vocal mic being like, "OK, another track, another track."

*(Vocals: "Oooh")*

Maggie: In the second pre-chorus, there's a group of "oooh's" that come in.

*(Vocals: "Oooh")*

Maggie: You can hear the air in them. They're really atmospheric.

*(Vocals: "Oooh")*

Maggie: I wanted these to sound really far away. When I decided, "Alright, I'm going to try making pop music, I still wanted to bring all the elements of folk music to it, because that's who I am and what I love. So reverbs like this, giving it a really roomy atmosphere, it was a way for me to give it a sense of place.

*(Vocals: "Oooh")*

*(Synth)*

Maggie: The lead line is a Tone2 Saurus. And Doug played that line.

*(Synth)*

*(Dove sound joins)*

Maggie: That's a morning dove.

*(Music ends)*

Maggie: I came into this project with all of these sound samples, knowing that I wanted to work them in. And those I had been sort of collecting for the last two years on hikes or travels, just sort of thinking like, *Alright, I'm not making music. What if I just collect this crayon box of colors for me to play with?*

*(Dove sound)*

Maggie: That sound for me is like, it just, it makes me feel calm. I associate that sound with slow mornings, coffee, it's like a little warm outside.

*(Dove sound)*

Maggie: It's really comforting.

*(Synth)*

Maggie: That countermelody comes in right at the end when we're just going to repeat ourselves for a little while. Let everybody like, "Do your thing." Makes it a dance banger.

*(Beat joins)*

Maggie: We finished the song. We're in the studio pretty much just enough time to finish the song, couple hours. Doug texted me a bounce of it on my way home. Took the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan. I listened to the song, and I was like, "Ah, fuck, this is way too poppy. I don't like this at all." I sent it to my parents, and my mom called me, and she was like, "It's really nice, honey." [laughter] I was like, "Cool." I showed my roommate when I got home, and I was like, "Ah, I don't know. I think it's too poppy." And she was like, "Yeah, maybe, but look, you finished something." And I was like, "Yeah, that feels good. Cool. Now I have something to turn in for school." So Doug initially did a quick mix, which is what I played in class.

Hrishikesh: That day, Pharrell Williams came to give a masterclass at Clive Davis. That masterclass, and his reaction to Maggie's song, was filmed.

*(Pharrell Williams: "Wow")*

*(Applause)*

*(Pharrell Williams: "Wow. I have zero, zero, zero notes for that.")*

Maggie: I recorded the masterclass with Pharrell in March of my senior year. The video was on the internet in March of my senior year. And then nothing happened. I graduated from college in May 20-something of my senior year, of 2016. On June 1, the video of me and Pharrell went viral. And I ran away. I, like, was super freaked out. I like put "Alaska" out, and then, like, went hiking for like 3 weeks.

Hrishikesh: And when you listen to the song nowadays, how do you feel about it? What do you hear?

Maggie: I think the dynamic shape of this song, you can hear me thinking through it.

*(Synth pad)*

Maggie: It starts in one place, and I'm, like, remembering, and starting to come to a place of acknowledging where I am. And, by the end, it is this celebration of

*(Guitar joins)*

Maggie: freedom. Of being free from writer's block, of recognizing myself as, like, a fully functioning adult.

*(Piano joins)*

Maggie: It's just like acknowledgement of being free.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Alaska," by Maggie Rogers, in its entirety.

*("Alaska" by MAGGIE ROGERS)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more on Maggie Rogers, including a link to buy this song. You can also watch the music video, and see the video of Pharrell that day in Maggie's class.

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