

**Song Exploder**  
**Neko Case - Last Lion of Albion**  
**Episode 141**

Hrishikesh: My name's Hrishikesh Hirway. I'm the producer of Song Exploder, and I'm usually the host. But for this episode, I wanted to try something different. I'm handing the interviewing and hosting duties over to someone else. Back in 2016, I did an episode with Thao Nguyen from the band Thao and the Get Down Stay Down, and we had such a great conversation and I thought she really got the heart of what this podcast is about. So I asked her, and she said yes. There's also brand new intro music, just for this, made by another past guest, Julien Baker. This episode was really fun to make, and I hope you like it. Here we go.

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

*("Last Lion of Albion" by NEKO CASE)*

Thao: Neko Case is a singer and songwriter. She's been nominated for multiple Grammys, and in addition to her own music, she's a member of the band The New Pornographers. And when Hrishikesh asked me to guest host an episode, Neko Case was who I was most excited to interview. I'll be touring solo with her this Fall, and I've been a fan of hers for years. In June 2018, she put out her 7th album, *Hell-On*, which she also co-produced. I interviewed her while she was here in town, in Berkeley. In this episode, Neko Case breaks down the song "Last Lion of Albion." Albion's one of the oldest names for the island of Great Britain, and it was while she was in England that this song first began.

*("Last Lion of Albion" by NEKO CASE)*

Neko: My name is Neko Case.

*(Music fades)*

Neko: I remember being in England on tour and, you know, I'm always looking for history everywhere I am, and I, you know, there's lions on everything in England and it's a pretty popular crest, and I just remember thinking how sad it was that all the lions of England were extinct. Anything really beautiful that's used as a national symbol is often something that has been destroyed. Kind of the signature move of colonialism. I was sitting in a coffee shop in Shoreditch, super jet lagged and just writing some things down, and I think I was just thinking like,

“Ah, what would it feel like to be the last lion of Albion?” And that just made me so sad. And I just had this fantasy that all of the lions killed would be just waiting somewhere, biding their time. And then I just started writing little pieces down, and then I would leave it, and then come back to it. At the same time, my boyfriend Jeff was working on just recording little things, because he likes to record things, so he just had this really cruddy Nylon string guitar, and he was just making these really excellent sounds, because you can really bend the strings on those things.

*(Guitar with beat)*

Neko: And I said, “Can I steal that riff right there?” I’m like, “Are you using that?” He’s like, “Nah, I don’t have any plans for it.” And there’s something about listening to something that you didn’t make, that brings a level of enjoyment that is even better. Like, I love that riff so much and I didn’t make it up, so there’s none of myself in there going, “Is it good enough? Is it weird?” It’s like, “Nah, that’s great!”

Thao: [Laughter]

Neko: I love that riff, yes!”

*(Guitar with beat)*

*(Music fades)*

Neko: So that was the key element, like that was definitely the heartbeat of the song.

*(Guitar)*

Neko: It takes it out of the Western scale just slightly, and it fluctuates in and out of tune so frequently and in such a awesome way.

*(Guitar)*

Neko: Then I just started singing the lines that I had written down.

*(Vocals join: “Last lion of Albion / They’ll use you for centuries to come / They’ll steal your patents for the sun / And you’ll feel extinction / When you see your face on their money”)*

*(Music ends)*

Neko: I thought about all of the ways in which rich groups of people or colonialists immortalize themselves, like with coins and statuary and buildings and, you know, I just thought, “What would be a good spell, what would be a way to like send some sort of message to some ancient gods that would bring this lion, this creature back for revenge?” And I just thought of the coin, like the way you’ll trace a coin with your thumb or your finger over and over again.

*(Vocals with guitar: “I wish I could trace the frowning compass of your mind / Drop a Mercury dime down a Roman drain and summon Mars”)*

*(Guitar)*

Neko: It’s so weird that we think of fairy tales and mythology as something that is old, and that, you know, it’s set, it’s already done, like that’s what storytelling is. It’s not done or dead or historic, it’s totally evolving, so it’s so much fun to do that. And the song already had such a beautiful hook to it from Jeff’s original guitar part that I thought the hook was good enough to draw people into this little story about this lion that is dead, but he’s not dead, because he’s waiting. The real big fantasy is that, you know, all those businessmen like Elon Musk and Donald Trump who have bought everything already like, I’m sure there are people that have like deeds to Mars, and, you know, they’re thinking about trashing this planet and they’re going to go to this other planet where the poor people aren’t, or something. I just hope all the lions are just waiting there and when they go down the stairs in their space machines, the lions just devour them.

*(Vocals with guitar: “Late in the heavens that are already bought / Sleeps a red planet in the galaxy of a lion’s thoughts / On the surface, every tendon and intended machine / Is gonna buckle, knuckle, kneel on a carpet of lion’s tongues”)*

*(Synth)*

Neko: The Farfisa is Björn Yttling from Peter Bjorn and John, and that sound is one of the reasons I really wanted to co-produce with him on half the record. I needed to get out of my comfort zone, and he has the instinct and the ear. He can totally let his shark eyelids come up and play in a really feral way. It really helped with the desperation part, the grindy desperation.

*(Synth fades)*

Neko: The drummer in our band, Dan, he's such a good drummer.

*(Drums)*

Neko: And Barbara Gruska plays some percussion on here.

*(Percussion)*

*(Drums join)*

Neko: And then Dan, he brought in Kyle Crane to do some counter percussion on Barbara Gruska's percussion.

*(Percussion)*

Neko: And it sounds so great to me. Like, I can't imagine what the song used to be before I heard it that way.

*(Drums join)*

*(Music ends)*

Thao: And then this piano vocoder?

*(Piano)*

Neko: That is Björn Yttling again.

*(Piano)*

Neko: First he was like, "Let's get some mics with the vocoder," I was like, "Vocoder? Alright!"

Thao: A vocoder's normally used to turn the human voice into a synthesized sound, but here, they put a piano through the vocoder instead of a voice.

Neko: I love it when people use things in a way that maybe they weren't supposed to be used? Just like, some instrument you've always known about, but never think about using?

*(Piano)*

*(Vocals: "Last lion of Albion / They'll use you for centuries to come")*

Neko: That was k.d. lang, and I'm so glad that she did the backup singing on it because sometimes you can harmonize with your own voice and it works, and sometimes it vibrates too badly in a way that isn't good, like I have a really nasal voice so I don't blend really well with people. And sometimes not with myself either. So luckily, she swooped in and saved the day. She did it remotely in Calgary, and I was like, "Can you just be like a dude backup singer on a pop record? Like you're in Foreigner or something."

*("I Want To Know What Love Is" by THE FOREIGNER)*

Neko: "Just be like, you're the dude who sings backup."

*(Music fades)*

Neko: And she was like, "Yep!" [laughter]

*(Vocals: "Last lion of Albion / They'll use you for centuries to come / Your wound's the main road into London")*

Neko: I tried it a couple times and I knew what the notes were supposed to be but I wasn't nailing it at all. And she is such a good harmony singer.

*(Vocals: "Last lion of Albion / They'll use you for centuries to come / They'll steal your patents for the sun / And you'll feel extinction / When you see your face on their money")*

Neko: I like reverb because it's showing what your human voice is vibrating, and how that reacts to the surroundings, like "How far am I from that wall?" Or, "Is this room made of concrete? Is there a lot of glass in here? Is there wood? I can hear wood in this room." It kind of reminds you that the room is an instrument in a way.

*(Vocals: "Last lion of Albion / The last of the Mohicans, gone / The last cedars of Lebanon / You'll feel extinction / When you see your face, face on their money")*

*(Guitar)*

Neko: It took a long time for it to sound like the song. And I think it's because we waited for so long before Jeff put the signature guitar sound on it. Because he'd played the riff but it wasn't on the same guitar, and it needed that same guitar, that specific Nylon string guitar, and it needed to be recorded in my kitchen,

Thao: Yeah [laughter]

Neko: where he recorded it to begin with. So it was kind of this little breakfast nook area, and so he recorded it in there and sent it to us. And we were all like, "Yes! Okay! Now it sounds like the song is supposed to sound like!"

*(Guitar)*

Neko: I'm there for every single second of the making of the record. I think I'm just a control freak, and that's like a very good trait to have if you're going to be a producer maybe? It's not lovely,

Thao: [Laughter]

Neko: but I don't think I've ever really done it any other way. Like even, you know, on my first record when I wasn't quote-unquote producing it, I still had a lot of opinions and wanted things turned up or down. And by my third record, my dear friend Darryl Neudorf who I record with a lot, and he's kind of my recording mentor, he [laughter] actually said, "You know you're producing, right?" And I was like, "Really?" He's like, "Yeah, this is what this means." I don't know if I would have understood that because I just was so ravenous to make something, the roles and the thoughts didn't occur to me. It's listening, having an opinion. Chasing a sound, being curious about a sound.

*(Piano joins)*

Neko: So I can go, "Yeah, I'm a producer," or "I'm a songwriter," or "I'm a performer," I can definitely say those things, but it took a long time. I don't know if that's a thing for women or if that's a thing for people who don't feel like they own themselves in a way, I'm not really sure. I definitely think it took a lot longer than it should have. But I feel like I know who I am.

*(Music ends)*

Neko: And I'm okay with that.

Thao: And now, here's "Last Lion of Albion," by Neko Case, in its entirety.

*("Last Lion of Albion" by Neko Case)*

Thao: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Neko Case, and for a link to buy or stream this song. You'll also find the episode from 2016 where I was a guest, and took apart one of my own songs.

Next time on Song Exploder, Hrishikesh is back with guest Christine and the Queens.

*("Doesn't Matter" by CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS)*

Thao: This episode was produced and edited by Hrishikesh Hirway, along with Christian Koons and intern Olivia Wood. The intro music for this episode was made by Julien Baker. My interview with Neko Case was engineered by Veronica Simonetti of Women's Audio Mission. Special thanks to Terri Winston. The illustrations for Song Exploder 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 the shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). Let us know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me on Twitter and Instagram @Thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

*("Doesn't Matter" by CHRISTINE AND THE QUEENS)*

*(Music fades)*