

Song Exploder
Brandi Carlile - You and Me On the Rock ft. Lucius
Episode 227

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: Did you do a lot of like rehearsal pre-production of this song before you started actually recording it for real?

Brandi: No. I'm very anti-rehearsal prior to recording.

Hrishikesh: Why is that?

Brandi: Well, because I'm superstitious. I believe that every song has a moment. And it's a really fragile moment where you write a song, and you know it, but you don't have it yet. Like it's still a risk, it could still derail, anything could still happen. And it's really the difference between take one and take three, where you go past that moment, and there's none of that "anything could happen" tension anymore, and you're past the take that you should have kept. So if that happens to you at rehearsal, the song loses it's rock and roll, you know, and I think rock and roll is a risk instead of a genre.

("You and Me On the Rock" by BRANDI CARLILE ft. LUCIUS)

Brandi: My name is Brandi Carlile.

Hrishikesh: Brandi Carlile is a singer and songwriter from Washington State. She's released seven albums and won six Grammys. Her most recent album is *In These Silent Days*, which debuted at number one on Billboard's folk and rock album charts. It was produced by her longtime collaborators, Dave Cobb and Shooter Jennings. In this episode, Brandi breaks down her song, "You and Me On the Rock," and how it was influenced by her wife, by the pandemic, and by Joni Mitchell.

("You and Me On the Rock" by BRANDI CARLILE ft. LUCIUS)

(Music fades)

Brandi: Everything had been shut down. All my summer shows had been canceled because of the pandemic. My life changed really fundamentally. And my wife

and I, who've been married for nearly 10 years, it'll be 10 years in September, we were shut in with our two kids full-time, all the time. And I'm the kind of person that has to maintain a certain level of adrenaline and [laughter] workaholism, and that I could not abide a total pause on my life or a shutdown. So I built a garden out of like stacked stones. And I made these raised beds and planted a whole bunch of vegetables. And then, it was like an immediate pouring myself into this project. The lyrics came to me one day out in the garden, as I was working with these rocks with these stones. I remember the Sunday School song that we used to sing in church when I was a little kid. It was like, "Build your house on a rock."

("Wise Man Built His House Upon The Rock")

Brandi: The concept of it was, "Don't build your house in the sand, and don't build your house in the stream, like build your house on a rock, build your house on something that can't be shaken, something that can't be dissolved." And I realized no matter what the world had to throw at me, even if it challenged my very identity, which is what it had done by taking away my ability to play music in front of people, that I've managed to build my house on a rock. And I wrote the lyrics of that song in my mind about my wife and kids. And then, I started thinking about Joni Mitchell [laughter] of all things, because there was something sunshine-y to the song. And it really got me thinking about what an influence she's had on me, particularly in this era of my life, having interpreted the whole Joni Mitchell *Blue* album at Disney Hall in LA and at Carnegie hall in New York city. And those experiences were like really immersive. That's the kind of thing that will change your songwriting. And I was really thinking about it, I was getting heady-y. I was thinking, "Man, I'm 40 years old. I can't sit here, and be derivative at this point in my life." And then, this other little voice chimes in, and it's like, "But you can once [laughter], why don't you just give yourself permission to go there just on one song?" And so, I did. I gave myself permission to fully dive down the Joni rabbit hole on "You and Me On the Rock." And I remember telling Tim and Phil, "I got some lyrics, and I really want to embrace the Joni influence one time, so I don't do it in every song. So I think we should write a song on the dulcimer."

(Dulcimer)

Brandi: Tim Hanseroth and Phil Hanseroth, the Hanseroth twins are my collaborators, my band. We're a trio. We've been a trio for about 21 years, 22 years, something like that. And we write all our songs together, and actually live together as well.

In fact, they helped me build that garden. I had no sense of melody on the song at all, or even rhythm of melody until Timmy brought that dulcimer out. And the lyrics that I had written just started to appear.

(Vocals join: "They build wooden houses on frozen ponds / In the summertime when the water's gone / Diagonal lines in their rolled-out lawns / And the sage always smells so pretty")

Brandi: But when I recorded the demo, I never meant for anybody to hear it other than me and Tim and Phil. I didn't even want to send it to Dave Cobb, you know, because I knew that he would say it's too Joni-y, and that's really what he said to Joni-y [laughter].

(Music fades)

Brandi: Joni Mitchell first entered my life in a couple of really profound ways. T Bone Burnett played me *Blue* when I was making the story with him in my early, mid to early twenties. And we listened to "All I want"

("All I Want" by JONI MITCHELL)

Brandi: first. And then, we got to the line that said, "I want to talk to you. I want to shampoo you."

("All I Want" by JONI MITCHELL)

Brandi: And I was appalled. I was like [laughter], "Turn it off. No [laughter], I cannot abide that lyric. I can't, I cannot forgive it." I couldn't forgive the innocence of it. I couldn't forgive this, it felt submissive to me. I couldn't forgive it for being what I believed was so feminine. It made me uncomfortable. I mean, first of all, I don't know if I'd been in love at that point in my life. I certainly didn't ever want to shampoo anyone at that point in my life, but I just, I couldn't because it just didn't feel tough to me. And there was something about it that I needed to shut down. Cut to, I meet my wife. She's from London, and I'm from the US, and so we don't get to date. If we're going to go on a date, it's going to be like a week somewhere in a hotel or a cabin when we're going to be going out to dinner and like thrown into the fire of seeing if we can co-exist. And so, we had this cabin in Northern Michigan, and we each brought an album, and hers was *Blue*. And she put *Blue* on, and I laughed at the lyric, and I was like, "Oh God, turn it off. The soreness. I can't, I cannot with that lyric." And she stops it. And she's like, "I don't know what this even is if you can't get your head around Joni Mitchell, like

you're 30 years old, it's time to pull it together." I was like, "I just don't think it's tough." And she's like, "Do you know what "Little Green" is about?" And I didn't. And she told me that "Little Green" was about Joni Mitchell getting pregnant on her own, and giving birth to a little baby who she tried to support for the better part of a year, and then wound up having to give up for adoption. And she puts the song on, and I'm like in floods of tears because it was the toughest song I'd ever heard in my life. It wasn't just like "Oh, "Little Green" is very tough." It was like, I have been wrong my whole life about what tough even means. It was that much of a revelation and a pivot. So Joni hasn't just changed me as an artist, she's changed me as a woman, you know, because she's given me some insight into what it means to be tough, what femininity really means, and that vulnerability is in fact tougher than anything I had been able to understand prior to that experience.

(Guitar)

Brandi: So we were in the studio, and we had transferred the song from dulcimer to acoustic guitar because Joni owns the dulcimer. Tim plays guitar. Dave Cobb was playing lead guitar, like some kind of picking thing, and he gave it a little bit more of a country lilt, and it started to get grounded in some of the Americana music that makes me really feel like who I am. Phil plays bass,

(Bass joins)

Brandi: and he's actually quite an underrated bass player.

(Bass)

(Guitar and drums join)

Brandi: And then, Chris Powell's this amazing, incredibly musical drummer that toured with us for the last couple of years.

(Drums)

Brandi: It's an incredibly busy drum part, but he was playing so light. It felt like with pencils.

(Drums)

Brandi: We record our whole band in one room all at once, because that's really what we know how to do the best. Everything else comes off disconnected for us, even if we play like a big stage, we're so close together that we're hitting each other with the heads of our guitars, because we have to play off each other. We actually don't know how to be separate. So in a studio, I can't be isolated, and they can't either, it just doesn't work. We're not who we are that way.

(Vocals with guitar: "They build wooden houses on frozen ponds / In the summertime when the water's gone / Diagonal lines in their rolled-out lawns")

(Vocals: "And the sage always smells so pretty")

Brandi: I was thinking back to my childhood, and I remembered my bus stop used to be across the street from a pond. And I used to love this little pond, and it was like seasonal, you know? It would be dry or it'd be there. It would freeze over. We go out there, and try to ice skate on it. It was really dangerous. Years later, I grew up, and I remember driving past the place where the pond used to be, and there was a house on it, built on the area that I knew full well would be a pond [laughter] in a couple of months. It was a brand new house with fences and the rolled out lawn. And I was like, "Well, they don't know that's going to flood. I know, but they don't know." I was able to find like, I guess, a little bit of humor in it, but I still feel bad for the family who, yes, I drive by, and see it's flooded all the time [laughter].

(Piano with guitar)

Brandi: Shooter Jennings is playing the piano. This song's very fluttery, it has the ability to just take off, and fly up into the air without anything holding it down. There needs to be some weight. And that piano makes what I'm saying sound important. I also like that you can hear me, and all the guitars, and everything in the room, in those piano mics.

(Vocals join: "I'll build my house up on this rock, baby / Every day with you / There's nothin' in that town I need / After everything we've been through")

(Vocals with piano: "Me out in my garden and you out on your walk / Is all the distance this poor girl can take")

(Vocals: "Without listenin' to you talk")

Brandi: The garden was a place that I would go to work, and to get my heart pumping, but also to have some control over something, you know? There was a lot of chaos in the world, and I would go out there and work in the garden while my wife, my buddy was out on these walks, and it occurred to me that, you know, that was all the distance that I needed really from her.

(Piano with guitar)

Brandi: There was something really feminine about the sentiment. I couldn't stop thinking about it. And I thought, "Well, you know what? I don't want to hear guys on this song with me." I just wanted it to sound like women, like the connection between women. And so, I recorded the harmonies myself at first,

(Vocals: "build my house up on this rock, baby / Every day with you")

Brandi: but it just sounded like three me's.

(Vocals: "There's nothin' in that town I need / After everything we've been through")

Brandi: And then, I thought of Lucius. The band Lucius sang in my Blue band. Their background vocals were just so perfect. And so, I sent it to them, and they wrote the background vocal for it, and took the song to a totally, a totally different place.

(Vocals: "I'll build my house up on this rock, baby / Every day with you / There's nothin' in that town I need / After everything we've been through / Me out in my garden and you out on your walk / Is all the distance this poor girl can take / Without listenin' to you talk / I don't need their money, baby / Just you and me on the rock")

Brandi: I feel so much more comfortable with my femininity in and out of music than I ever did before. I realize it's not tied to the way I look, I realize it's not tied to whether or not my voice is low or high on any given song. It's not even tied to my lyrics, you know? It's innate, and I'm raising two little women, and I'm married to one. The feminine is central to my life.

(Vocals: "It's a big sea, but it can't touch you and me / It's just not water for you / And what are you?")

Brandi: I knew the song was really special, and I knew it was very Joni-y, and I knew I was going to have to play it for Joni someday [laughter]. I became friends with

Joni after her 75th birthday celebration. In a fluke situation, my wife wound up spending an afternoon with Joni. And like by default, I get invited to dinner with Joni Mitchell as like my wife's date. And that's when me and Joni came up with the idea of doing jams at Joni's house once a month to do music together.

(Organ)

Brandi: So I see the song through, and I just took the unmixed version of that song straight to Joni's house, have a glass of wine, and play her the song. And I told her everything that I've said today. You know, she nodded, but she didn't offer any commentary. And she said, "Alright, well, let's hear it then." And so, we go into the living room, and I put it on, and she's leaned forward in her chair with her wine in her hand. And she's kind of grooving to it a little bit, and I'm watching, and I'm just thinking like, "Oh my God, what's she going to say? This thing's going to end, and she's going to look at me, and she's going to say, you know, "You're too old to do this. You need to carve out your own path," or something that would, you know, destabilize me." And the song ends,

(Music fades)

Brandi: and she looks up at me, and she smiles, and she goes, "Sounds like a hit [laughter],

(Guitar with drums)

Brandi: sounds like a hit," she says.

(Vocals join: "Woo")

(Music ends)

Brandi: For my family, I just decided to just not be apart from them if I can help it. So I guess maybe the longest I've ever been away from my wife or kids, probably five, six days. And even then I totally panic. I'm quite a codependent person. And I think I'm going to have to wear that as a badge of honor, because if I was ever going to learn to be alone, I would have had to do it before 40 years old, I think. And having my family with me is, it's important to me, but I can see now that it's important to them too. We're doing this together.

(Organ)

Brandi: When we got shut down, we don't like to talk about it, but we did worry about money. And when I was in that garden, writing that song,

(Drums join)

Brandi: I was thinking about what enough is enough looks like, do I have what I need?
And I did.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "You and Me On the Rock" by Brandi Carlile, in its entirety.

("You and Me On the Rock" by BRANDI CARLILE ft. LUCIUS)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download this song.

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