

Song Exploder
Lucy Dacus - Thumbs
Episode 218

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: Before this episode starts, I want to give a content warning. There's some explicit language, but more crucially, the subject matter could be upsetting to some listeners. There's an explicit description of a pretty violent act in the song. And there's some not explicit, but implied behavior of a parent mistreating their child. So please be mindful of that and take care before going ahead.

("Thumbs" by LUCY DACUS)

Hrishikesh: Lucy Dacus is a singer and songwriter from Richmond, Virginia. She put out her first album in 2016, and in 2018, she formed the band boygenius with Julien Baker and Phoebe Bridgers. In June 2021, she released her third album *Home Video*, which includes this song, "Thumbs." The first time I heard it, I knew I wanted to ask Lucy about how and why she made it. So after some COVID testing, we spoke in person here in Los Angeles, and she told me the story of how "Thumbs" took months and months to get right.

("Thumbs" by LUCY DACUS)

Lucy: I'm Lucy Dacus.

(Music fades)

Lucy: The day that I wrote "Thumbs" was in 2018, but the event that the song is about happened like five years before. I was 19 and had a friend who was crying because she had just been on the phone, and she told me that her dad was in town, and she hadn't seen him for a really long time. And I knew that he was a bad dude. And I just told her like, "I'm coming with you. You absolutely don't have to do this alone." We met him at a diner-ish place. I wanted to say to him the things that I wish she would and I didn't, but all the silences I tried to fill with like, "Yeah. You know, she's doing amazing," and he like kept trying to take credit and be like, "I'm proud of you." Like I tried to imply like, "It has nothing to do with you." Like how could he be proud if he wasn't there? Everything that she is, is like from herself. I am proud of her, and I respect her so much for those

things because I've like had the privilege of watching her. And I just immediately hated him. And I was like raised to just not hate, you know like, "Love everyone." And I still try to access that love, especially when I feel hate coming on. But this was the first time that it just really won out. Yeah. Fuck that guy [laughter].

(Guitar)

Lucy: I started writing my own songs probably when I was like 15 and just kept them to myself or show them to like a couple of friends. But I had a lot of friends in Richmond just peer pressure me into doing shows. They'd be like, "We need an opener. We know you write songs, so show up." And so when this happened, I was already playing shows, but I never thought about writing about this. I didn't even journal about it, which is odd for me. It's hard to say if I was actively ignoring the story, but I wasn't thinking about it over time. I have recognized how powerful my dissociative powers are [laughter]. My brain will simply not show me what I'm not ready to see. And I think this was one of those things where just suddenly, for some reason, the timer went off like, ding. It took five years, but now the thought is fully baked and here it is out of the oven.

(Guitar ends)

Lucy: The day that I wrote "Thumbs" was in Nashville when I was like out there recording some random stuff. And everyone that I work with wanted to go get Thai food. Jacob Blizzard, who is my guitarist, and Collin Pastore, who is our co-producer, the three of us have made everything that I've ever made. And in the car, I had this little notebook that I carry around, and I just started writing from the top.

(Vocals: "You hung up the phone / And I asked you what was wrong / Your dad has come to town / He'd like to meet")

Lucy: I always write melody and words at the same time. I feel like melody is sort of like a highlighter where like pitch accentuates meaning, like the words are the words, but they're balanced by the emotion that you put into the performance.

(Vocals: "So we meet him at a bar / You were holding my hand hard / He ordered rum and coke / I can't drink either anymore / He hadn't seen you since the fifth grade / Now you're nineteen and you're 5'8 / He said, "Honey, you sure look great / Do you get the checks I send on your birthday?")

Lucy: I wrote the whole song on the 15 minute car ride. And after I was done, I felt like literally ill [laughter]. We like got to the restaurant and I was like, "You go ahead," and they got a table. And I just like opened the car door and like kind of leaned on my legs and like felt like I was going to throw up and just cried a little bit.

(Vocals: "I would kill him / If you let me / I would kill him / Quick and easy / Your nails are digging / Into my knee / I don't know how you keep smiling")

Lucy: Yeah I haven't had a feeling like that before or since. I was so nervous the first time I played "Thumbs." I was on tour with boygenius, that's my band with PB Bridgers and Julien Baker. And we love to show each other our songs in progress. So we were doing like the song share backstage, and I started playing it. Phoebe actually was like, "You have to play this tonight." So I played it at the show.

(Vocals with guitar: "You hung up the phone / And I asked you what was wrong")

(Guitar)

Lucy: I knew that I needed like practice playing it since writing it made me feel sick, and I knew I needed to play it before I recorded it. I was really grateful for all the shows that I played this at, because I would ask people not to record it. It actually created a bond, the fact that people respected that. Yeah, there were some nights that I cried or some nights that my throat closed up and I just had to like gulp and start again. But it's like, yeah, just mutual trust that I actually hadn't felt at shows before, but it felt so awesome.

(Applause)

Lucy: So I'd been playing the song for a while, and then asked my friend to my house so I could show it to her because I wanted to ask permission to put it on the album. If she had told me, "You can't record this," I wouldn't have. I broke down playing it for her. I like kind of forgot to play the right chords, and by the end of it, I was just like the snotty nosed, ugly, crying, little sap. And I mean, she said the thing that has made it possible to put it out where she was like, "This is not a sad song. This is about our friendship. And it just makes me realize that I'm so glad you were the one there."

(Vocals: "I clear my throat / And say we ought to get home / He offers us a ride / I reply, "No, that's alright" / And when we leave / You feel him watching / So we walk a mile in the wrong direction")

Lucy: When I first showed Jacob, "Thumbs," he just said, "Sing it and play guitar, and I'll do electronic drums and kind of like work out an arrangement."

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "So we meet him at a bar / You were holding my hand hard")

(Bass with drums fade)

Lucy: And I actually just like hated it, even though it's not that bad.

(Vocals with guitar: "I would kill him / If you let me")

Lucy: I just knew it couldn't be that big. I was listening to it and drafting my email as I was listening to it like, "This ain't it [laughter]." But that's okay, that's most of recording, saying, "This ain't it." And so this demo that you hear was never supposed to be heard by anybody, but such is the nature of this podcast.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "Your nails are digging / Into my knee / I don't know how you keep smiling")

Lucy: So then when we went into the studio to record it, "I was like, this is the one that's going to be the easiest, because I'm just going to play guitar and sing it. And it'll be like the shows." And the first night that we tried that, we thought we got it, like take two.

(Vocals with guitar: "I love your eyes / And he has 'em / Or you have his / 'Cause he was first")

(Guitar)

Lucy: And Collin came into the tracking room and just like hugged me, and cried like snotty cry, which is not something that he and I have done much. I record at Trace Horse Studio, Nashville, which is owned by Preston Cochran and Scottie Prudhoe, or they run it, and they were my high school band. So everyone there is like people I've known since we were all teenagers. And we were saying like, "We've known each other for so long, and who would have thought we'd be tracking like this?" Everyone was just saying like more emotional stuff than we

usually say. And then the next day we listened back to it and it just wasn't good [laughter].

(Guitar ends)

Lucy: Like the emotion was there, but the recording was bad. And we were like, "Oh, I guess we should just try again." So we tried with an acoustic, we tried with me not playing guitar, we tried full band version for a second, and nothing felt right. And so like we finished the whole record, but "Thumbs" wasn't done. And then I went back, January of 2020. And I said like, "I wish I could just sing this a cappella and not have it be weird." And so I just sang it and then added things underneath that. I wanted it to be as close to not existing as possible. Like I wanted it to feel like a cappella plus, essentially. And so the version that's on the record is only the vocal.

(Vocals: "I clear my throat / And say we ought to get home / He offers us a ride / I reply, "No that's alright"")

Lucy: And a pad

(Synth pad)

Lucy: that is like the most boring pad. I was like, "I want this pad to have zero personality."

(Synth pad)

Lucy: And then a bass synth.

(Bass synth)

Lucy: The bass synth moments are just when I feel it in my gut, that is when the bass needs to be in because it's like, I feel bass-y in my body [laughter].

(Vocals, synth pad, and bass: "So we walk a mile in the wrong direction")

(Wind sound)

Lucy: And then the wind sound is like when I feel like kind of crazed or erratic.

(Vocals, wind sound, synth pad, and bass: "I don't know how you keep smiling / I don't know how you keep smiling / I don't know how you keep smiling")

Lucy: It's a little brutal because you just have to interact with the story and you don't really get an out. There isn't some opening up of the arrangement, it's kind of like front to back, a story. And I kind of hear it more as a story than as a song, but also I lived it so maybe I'm biased.

(Vocals, wind sound, and synth pad: "I love your eyes / And he has 'em / Or you have his / 'Cause he was first / I imagine my thumbs on the irises / Pressing in until they burst")

(Synth pad)

Lucy: I remember showing it to my drummer, Ricardo. And I remember saying to Ricardo for the first time like, "I think I'm going to call it, "Thumbs." And he like jumped out of his chair and he was like, "That is brutal. That is so much." And I think everyone in my life was really surprised like as was I, because it's really violent, it's unlike me.

(Synth pad ends)

Lucy: What does it say about me that I came up with this image? I don't know. I think I'd like to believe that what you make comes from you, but isn't solely defining you all the time.

(Vocals: "You two are connected by a pure coincidence / Bound to him by blood, but baby, it's all relative / You've been in his fist ever since you were a kid / But you don't owe him shit even if he said you did")

Lucy: The last bit of the song that kind of like sums up what I wish for my friend, I like wrote it down, "but like you don't owe him shit" line. And you know, I say it twice in the song. I wrote it down twice, and the first time felt like it was for her.

(Synth pad)

Lucy: And the second time felt like it was for me. I am adopted, and my birth father is a little obsessive. Basically, I also needed to hear that I don't owe him shit, which I didn't know I believed until I said it out loud.

(Synth pad)

Lucy: My mom is actually adopted as well, and so the idea of like chosen family has been a part of my life, my whole life. So blood ties have never really made sense to me, and I think that they are used as a tool for manipulation. Like you owe me this because I gave birth to you. So yeah, I think that you don't owe your family [laughter]. I think that it can be beautiful to feel like you want to enrich the people who have loved you with your own love, like that is at the core like a very human and wonderful exchange. But yeah, family blood, it's not as important [laughter] as I think people make it out to be.

(Vocals join: "You don't owe him shit even if he said you did")

Lucy: I think up until this point, I've been protecting myself from the task of having to play things that feel bad and I've watched friends write super vulnerable and painful music, and then they have to play it every night, like I've been afraid to do that. And I think I have resisted going into certain depths. But this record, I just did it anyways.

(Synth pad)

Lucy: And I'm already starting to see like, oh yeah, that fear was legitimate. And I have to remind myself that like if it's a night where I can't handle it, I don't have to play it. And I want to believe that anybody that really cares about me would understand that. And I hope that it is therapeutic, and I hope that it can provide a sense of solace. And I'm sorry that it does, I wish less people could relate to the song, honestly.

(Wind sound)

(Wind sound ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Thumbs," by Lucy Dacus, in its entirety.

("Thumbs" by LUCY DACUS)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net, where you'll find links to buy or stream "Thumbs."

This episode was made by me with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia

from PRX, a network of independent, listener supported, artists owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at 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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.