

Song Exploder
Arooj Aftab - Mohabbat
Episode 231

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

One of the songs I keep coming back to is "Mohabbat," by Arooj Aftab. It's really special to me. I listen to it all the time. I've been listening to it so often that I wanted to revisit her episode about it.

In the time since the episode's come out, she released a collaborative album with Vijay Iyer and Shahzad Ismaily, called *Love In Exile*, which got two Grammy nominations. And she has a new album that's about to come out on May 31st, called *Night Reign*. Here's her episode:

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

Arooj Aftab is a singer and composer based in Brooklyn. She grew up in Saudi Arabia, but her family is from Pakistan. And earlier this year, she made history by becoming the first Pakistani artist to win a Grammy. Her song, "Mohabbat" won the Best Global Music Performance Grammy, and she was nominated for Best New Artist. "Mohabbat" was first released on her 2021 album, *Vulture Prince*, but it's been a part of Arooj's life for a long time. In this episode, she tells the story of how the song was first born, and how it lived with her and evolved over the years before she finally recorded it.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

(Vocals: "Ham na hoñge")

Arooj: My name is Arooj Aftab.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB fades down)

"Mohabbat Karne Waale" is this poem written by this guy Hafeez Hoshiarpuri.

He was born in 1912. And he wrote this beautiful poem, of which I've taken some lines and adapted them into my song, "Mohabbat."

Many, many different singers from South Asia have, have rendered this poem to song over the course of time.

("Mohabbat Karne Waale" by MEHDI HASSAN)

(Vocals: "Mohabbat")

Hrishikesh: This is legendary Pakistani singer Mehdi Hassan.

(Vocals: "Mohabbat karne waale kam na honge")

Arooj: I would consider it sort of like a South Asian standard, you know? Like there's some pieces that are, literally, handed down and treated exactly the same way as Jazz Standards. And so, I would say "Mohabbat" is one of them.

(Vocals: "Teri mehfil")

("Mohabbat," by Mehdi Hassan fades out)

The first time that I had ever really heard it, I think I was probably like seven or eight. My parents who are, like, really huge music enthusiasts, you know, they would always have these sort of musical evenings. Like, they would invite their friends over, they would sometimes invite like local musicians and singers over. It's called a *mehfil*.

And so, I was sitting next to my father and he had his little, like, notebook where he had like, poetry written down or lyrics written down. And he would sort of flip through it and then decide which song to sing for the evening, or whatever. And I think that was the first time I interacted with it, was him actually singing it and seeing it written in his journal.

I think it was not only the first time I heard the song, but also I think like, as a kid, the first time I was really processing how cool music is and how amazing singing is. And so my desire to make a really honest version of it has been there for a long time.

In 2000 and like 9 or 10, I was in Bushwick at a very close friend's house. And she had this, like, beautiful rooftop.

It was summertime in New York, and two or three other friends were visiting from Karachi. And we just went up to the roof, you know, with a bottle of wine. And she had a ukulele. I was like, "I can't really play anything on this." (laughs). But, you know, it's like "Yeah, we're gonna sing something." So I just kind of like finagled it into sounding like "dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun." And then just playing one note over and over again,

And I was like, "Yo! Mohabbat!" (laughs) Uh, so that was kind of it. It just took that.

And then I was like, "Okay, I'm flying, I'm flying, I'm flying. Let's go. Let's go." You know.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

(Vocals: "Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge")

I think that was the first time that a melody felt good enough in my head that I sang it. That was like exactly the step that I wanted to take. And that I was kind of waiting for to happen organically. And so, you know, a Bushwick rooftop and a ukulele, and a bottle of wine, and the door is opened (chuckles).

I went on to write and record my first record *Bird Underwater*, and I thought about "Mohabbat" quite a bit, but I felt that it was not anywhere near ready. But I had started to play it live.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - live version)

(Vocals: "Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge")

This recording is from 2015. The band was upright bass, saxophone, keyboard, and drums.

My musical collaborators are kind of a rotating family of people that I love and trust with my music, and so sometimes it would be bass, drums and acoustic guitar.

I was just loving hearing what all it could be or not be, you know?

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - live version)

(Vocals: "Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge")

I think we played it live for like

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - live version ends - applause)

probably five or six years. And my music collaborators changed a lot over that time as well. And so, it kind of has been doing its thing for awhile. That's kind of how much I cared about it, you know?

Like I just cared about it. I just wasn't happy with it, ever. And then, it finally, finally, after millions of years, and many different arrangements, and many different sonic iterations, started to feel right.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - harp in)

My harp player is Maeve Gilchrist. We went to school together, so I've been hearing her play for so long. We had played it duo a couple of times. I love playing duo with her, because she doesn't play, like, really sweet and angelic, you know? It's like, not pretty. Like, she can get really metal and I love that, you know? She can really like push it, and break the norm of what you're expecting a harp to sound like.

And so, after playing it for so many years, and then just playing it duo with Maeve, like, it kind of suddenly just became really clear to me.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - harp in)

Whenever I hear like, one repeating note, that's, like, really exciting to me. My ethos is very, like, minimalism. But I still missed the acoustic guitar element of it.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - harp and guitar)

And so, the guitar is by Gyan Riley.

Gyan and Maeve created separate parts that lock together. And they're playing so beautifully.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - harp and guitar)

If you had a harp, you wouldn't really put an acoustic guitar with it because they occupy such a similar space, sonically.

But I was like, yeah, but that's what, that's what I want to do. Like, I want it to feel like one part that two different people are playing. Like it's a two headed monster, and one arm is playing the guitar and the other arm is playing the harp. And it's the same part.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - add bass, then drop harp and guitar)

And then Shahzad just kind of followed.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - MOOG synth)

The synth is Shahzad Ismaily. He played MOOG synth on it. I was like, Shahzad, I want you to take like a crazy, really long, like, storytelling solo in the middle. And like, don't worry about time. Just take the, like, epic solo.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - MOOG synth solo)

After playing it for myself for six years, to actually record it, I really, really needed the music to be, like, super expansive and very expressive.

There are so many little moments that just come out of nowhere and surprise you.

For example, Nadjie's flugelhorn.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - flugelhorn)

Her name is Nadjie Noordhuis.

And so she comes in and I was just like, man, you're just like the, you're like the color. Like, you're like the sunrise.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - add everything back then drop to just percussion)

Then I sent it out to Jamey Haddad, who lives in Cleveland. He is a percussionist and drummer. He kind of invented the, like, alternative drum set where like, instead of a snare, there's a djembe, and like the sort of "world drum kit." He's like a legend.

But whenever I write to him, "If I send you this tune, can you send me some stuff?" And he's always just like, "Yeah, yeah. I'm down, I'm down."

And he sent over a bunch of stems. And then we kind of like edited the percussion a lot, taking a lot out and making it the way that it is now. With the djembes going like, (mimics djembe). It's accentuating certain key moments.

And I love the rhythm that Jamey is doing there on the zills, like the "check, checka, check, checka, check, check, check, checka, check, check."

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB - djembe)

I was like, I just love that. I want that all over the song. But it was like, no, no, no. Let's kind of place it strategically.

What I really, really wanted, from the music of it, was to kind of convey the emotion of the lyrics, so that people who hear it do not have to rely on knowing the language.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

(Vocals: "Mohabbat")

Mohabbat is in Urdu.

(Vocals: "...karne waale kam na hoñge")

The words that are in my "Mohabbat," (laughs) let's just call it that. It's "Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge / Terī mehfil meñ lekin ham na hoñge."

(Vocals: "Terī mehfil meñ lekin ham na hoñge")

He means basically like, there's many people around you who admire you, but I won't be a part of it.

You'll have plenty of lovers, plenty of admirers, followers, people who respect you, that kind of thing, but I won't be one of them.

So that's just like, so fantastic.

(Vocals: "Zamāne bhar ke ġham yā ek terā ġham")

"Zamāne bhar ke ġham yā ek terā ġham / Ye ġham hogā to kitne ġham na hoñge." So he's kind of, like, after being like, "I'm not going to be in your hang anymore. Peace. I'm out of here," He's actually really sad about it, you know? He's weighing the weight of the world against the weight of, like, losing this person.

This is so romantic, you know? And just so big, which I really liked.

(Vocals: "Agar tū ittifāqan mil bhī jaa.e")

"Agar tū ittifāqan mil bhī jaa.e." So that's an interesting thing to introduce kind of later. "I would still be aching to be with you, even if I did get a chance to be with you."

So, you know, he kind of starts off by kind of giving you the impression that like, this is something that he's walking away from. But then, halfway through the song, you're like, "Oh, you actually, like didn't ever even have a chance, dude. This is like totally all in your head."

When I read that line, I was like, "Whoa, okay. I kind of think I've been there."

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

Like, you're so into someone and, you know, even if the opportunity to be with them is forming, you kind of self-sabotage because you think that they're like so bigger than you, you know? And that's something that is like such a subtle kind of thing to experience. And it's so difficult to put that in words.

There's so much happening, so simply, in the lyrics, that at this point I was like, okay, I'm just gonna like go back to the opening lines, and then kind of get out of here.

(Vocals: "Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge")

I've always really loved this poetry for this reason, like, and I've always felt that there's like so much more happening here between these lines.

It is an iconic thing in our history and culture for sure, of music and poetry. I'm not comparable to any of the legends who, like, sang this, but I'm glad to be a part of the conversation because it is, what I did with it, is like, a thing of its own.

("Mohabbat," by AROOJ AFTAB)

There was this music that I've always been wanting to make, which would really gracefully and respectfully and deeply combine all of my roots from different places and all of the things that I love about music.

And this music is personal to my experience of life, being from Pakistan, and then studying jazz, and then living in New York.

"Mohabbat" is kind of like the friend that stays with you for like, all of the years, really, you know.

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of these ideas and elements came together in the final song.

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And now, here's "Mohabbat," by Arooj Aftab, in its entirety.

("Mohabbat" by AROOJ AFTAB)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download "Mohabbat."

This episode was originally produced by me, Craig Eley, Casey Deal, Kathleen Smith, and Chloe Parker. The re-issue was produced with additional help from Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.