

**Song Exploder**  
**Madonna - Hung Up**  
**Episode 239**

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

*("Hung Up" by MADONNA)*

Madonna's the best-selling female recording artist of all time. She has 12 albums that have gone multi-platinum. She's won 7 Grammys, and she's had *fifty* songs reach number 1 on the Billboard Dance chart. That's more #1s than anyone, in any category, ever.

In today's episode, she's going to talk about one of those number ones: "Hung Up," from her 2005 album *Confessions on a Dance Floor*. The song, and that album, were co-produced by Stuart Price, an electronic musician, producer, and DJ from the UK. Madonna has a new, career-spanning album out, called *Finally Enough Love: 50 Number Ones*, and in honor of its release, Madonna and Stuart Price told me the story of how their collaboration and partnership led to one of Madonna's biggest hits.

*("Hung Up" by MADONNA)*

Madonna: My name is Madonna Louise Ciccone.

Stuart: And I'm Stuart Price, the co-producer and co-writer of "Hung Up."

Madonna: I met Stuart 'cause I was looking for a musical director,

Hrishikesh: A musical director, in this case, would be someone to come work with Madonna, to shape her songs into what they would be for a performance. They'd conduct the band and arrange the music to fit with the overall vision for the tour, and Stuart was recommended for the job.

Madonna: but I was like, "Oh, he's a DJ. He's not gonna know, like I need somebody who's like, really musical, and really knows how to play musical instruments, and I was *extremely* resistant, but it turns out that Stuart is an excellent musician also.

Stuart But the time that we would spend together touring, I mean, we were rehearsing all day long as I remember it. And so there's this nine or 10 hours a day, and the rehearsals were like, three months long or something.

Madonna: And when you rehearse, and you do rehearsals and sound checks, you start playing chords and then somebody starts playing a drum beat, and then I start singing and then suddenly I'm writing a song. I mean, making music becomes a habit, and things evolve naturally, so,

Stuart: So before we even, I think, got in the studio, we'd built that shorthand first.

Madonna: Exactly. And the origin of "Hung Up" came out of Stuart's brain first.

Stuart: Around this time, so in, like, 2005, we had just finished touring and over the course of the tour, the music had sort of been getting more clubby, more remix-y, and during that period, I would be DJing as well.

So, it's 5am; I'm driving back down the M-6 from Liverpool to get back to London, and trying not to fall asleep 'cause I'd been DJing for three nights straight, so I better put the radio on.

*(Radio clicks)*

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*

Stuart: On comes ABBA at 5:30 AM. The song's called, "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)."

"Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!" has this synth riff in it. It, like, cuts through anything. You can hear that melody from miles away. *(Sings Abba riff)*

*(Music joins)*

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*

*(Stuart whistles join)*

Stuart: And I thought, *Oh, that's a good idea for a sample.*

*(Music fades)*

And so, about three hours before the gig the next weekend, I thought, *Oh, I better try and slap something together with that.* So I sampled it off the vinyl, played it in through the DJ mixer, had a filter on it.

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*

Stuart: And it begins with a clock tick,

*(Clock tick)*

Stuart: in part because, when you're DJing, you are, like, manually beat-matching everything, and the clock is easy to mix in a set. But it also turns out that it works on this other level for the song as well, which sort of supports the lyric of what Madonna came up with.

*(Clock tick stops)*

*(Vocals: "Time goes by so slowly")*

Stuart: Madonna was gonna do a film with Luc Besson, where, you were all these different roles in it and this, like, time traveling,

Madonna: Yeah. Luc Besson brought this script to me, and he said, "I want you to be in it, and I want you to write all the music for it. And it takes place in all these different eras: the twenties, the forties, the sixties." I had recorded all these French cabaret songs, and all the other period songs were really coming to me easily. And when we got to this moment in time - disco and, and dance music - the only thing I could think about was Studio 54.

Stuart: I remember you came to the studio and you were struggling with all this work for the film and, "Oh man, there's so much to do. I don't know how we're gonna get through it all. And there's this section," and you said, "It's supposed to be like ABBA at Studio 54. You've got anything like that?"

Madonna: *(Laughs)*

Stuart: All of a sudden I remembered there was just this little seed of an idea that I had taken out to DJ with, and I played it.

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*

Stuart: And I was looking at you for feedback, thinking, *God, is this any good? Or is this just an absolute turkey?*

Madonna: I immediately heard the melody in my head, like, *(Sings)* "Every little thing that you say or do." I heard that, Like I just knew it, like, I just felt intuitively, *This is something, this is gonna be something.*

Stuart: And you started singing immediately into the mic.

*(Vocals with Beat: "Every little thing that you say or do / I'm hung up / I'm hung up on you / Waiting for your call, baby, night and day / I'm fed up / I'm tired of waiting on you")*

*(Music stops)*

Start: The first vocal that we did is the final vocal on the track.

Madonna: Yup.

Stuart: We came up with the verses a little bit later, but it's amazing that that's just ended up being the final thing.

Madonna: But a lot of times it happens like that: the first vocal you do, the demo vocal, is always the one you end up using. And you try to perfect it, and you just go, "Oh, fuck, nothing's better than the demo vocal" and you go back to it.

*(Vocals with drum beat: "Waiting for your call, baby, night and day / I'm fed up / I'm tired of waiting on you")*

Madonna: All the music that Stuart and I worked on, for the most part, happened in his attic recording studio in London.

Stuart: It was sort of a completely illegally built studio, in the flat that I had.

Madonna: You had to climb up a ladder to get to it, and it was all white. And it had a couch, a white couch in it, that I would often have nervous breakdowns on.

Stuart: The white couch there was sort of under a pitched roof. So I remember you sort of had to sit there, *(laughs)* kind of a little bit awkwardly, with the microphone in your hand, and then you would sort of lean forward, and we would do the vocals that way.

*(Music stops)*

Madonna: The other thing about the way we worked, and so not my world and my life anymore, is that it was just me and Stuart. There were no other technicians, there were no other people. Stuart did everything: he played all the instruments, he operated everything, he programmed everything, he was the DJ, and I was just the whiny pop star that showed up.

Stuart: *(Chuckles)*

Madonna: And (*laughs*) there was no drinking, there was no smoking, there was no eating. And there were no phones.

Stuart: Yeah.

Madonna: There was just us and the music, But that's why we got so much work done. We literally only worked, which is how it should be.

*(ABBA sample plays)*

Stuart: Having the sample, that in itself doesn't make a song. A song has a verse, a song has a bridge. It was gonna be a little bit stuck. But then I just thought, *well, okay, that's the real ABBA doing the sample, today, I'm gonna be "fake ABBA."* And I started sort of trying to write a verse, and come up with some new chords, you know - play some drums,

*(Bass)*

Stuart: play some keyboard.

*(Keyboard joins)*

Stuart: And to create some sort of cohesiveness to this, I'll multitrack myself playing all these parts and then I'll cram it all back through the DJ mixer again, like I did with the original sample.

*(ABBA sample plays)*

Stuart: And then, the structure was really quick to put together because, I mean, Madonna has this great natural instinct for, *What should happen now?* She knew exactly where the verse should land, how soon it should be in.

*(Vocals and beat: "Time goes by so slowly for those who wait / No time to hesitate / Those who run seem to have all the fun / I'm caught up / I don't know what to do")*

*(Music ends)*

Madonna: "Hung Up" is kind of a love song. I'm saying, "Every little thing that you say or do, I'm hung up on you; but I'm also, I'm over it. I'm over the bullshit. Like, you're not there. You're never there for me, so I'm hanging up on you."

*(Vocals: "Tik tik tok, it's a quarter to 2 / And I'm done / I'm hanging up on you")*

*(Clock)*

Stuart: Overnight, you would take a mix and go home, and I think you would just listen to it, and then come back the next day and we'd have the next part, which is where "Time goes by so slowly" came from.

*(Vocals and clock: "Time goes by so slowly / Time goes by so slowly")*

*(Synth and drums)*

Stuart: With "Hung Up," there's an urgency to it.

*(Synth and drums)*

Stuart: That tone there is actually just a filter, just modulating really, really fast. To me it felt like a cityscape. It felt like you were sort of driving through a city, and there was some sort of buzz of the lights, or electricity.

*(Beat fades)*

Stuart: We weren't really working with *(laughs)* many people around, to say, "Oh, let's do some backing vocals now."

Madonna: Yeah.

Stuart: But we needed different textures of voices. And so using a pitch shifter, just by lowering Madonna's vocal down, not a whole octave, it just goes halfway, drops down a fifth or something, it just created this effect where it feels more like, 'male' in its sound.

*(Pitched vocals: "Every little thing that you say or do, I'm hung up")*

Stuart: I couple that pitch vocal with the vocoder as well,

*(Vocoder vocals: "Every little thing that you say or do,")*

*(Pitched vocals join: "I'm hung up, I'm hung up on you")*

Stuart: And so there's this contrast of this upbeat lead vocal, with these sort of sad backing vocals.

*(Clean, Pitched and Vocoder vocals: "Waiting for your call, baby, night and day / I'm fed up / I'm tired of waiting on you")*

Madonna: The whole story is about falling in love and then falling out of love, which is basically what life is about,

*(Strings)*

Madonna: the upside of love, and then, you know, the rejection or the destruction or the end. "Hung Up" embodies both sides of the story.

*(Clean, Pitched and Vocoder vocals: "Don't cry for me / 'Cause I'll find my way / You'll wake up one day / (But it'll be too late)"*

Madonna: Luc Besson got sidetracked by another film he was making, and I got sidetracked by my record, so we both agreed that it wasn't the right time to make the movie. But he was happy to give me all the songs that I had worked on. But ABBA, they didn't allow people to sample their music. So I was like, "Oh man, this is not cool, because this song is so dope, so what are we gonna do about it?"

Stuart: And then you wrote them a handwritten letter. You were really honest in the letter about how special their music had been to you.

Madonna: And then, I decided to pay them a visit, honestly expecting them to turn me down. But then I thought, *Well, you never know; if I'm really charming, I could appeal to them. I could play them the track.* And I think they appreciated the effort.

Stuart: And I just think it came from a place of honesty, and sort of consideration. And I think that connected with them, and they let us use it. Thank goodness.

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*

Madonna: When we started working on the record, we were just bursting with ideas and ready to go.

Stuart: And dance music was a culture that you were immersed in, it was a culture I was immersed in, but at that time, in the States, you know, dance music was like a forbidden word. It wasn't popular on American radio around then, 2005. And so I think because you're sort of feeling that, *Well, it's not gonna get on the radio anyway, we may as well make a record that we just love, and we just think is fun, and we don't care that no one's gonna like it.*

Madonna: It's the story of my life (laughs)

*("Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)" by ABBA)*  
*(Music stops)*

Madonna: This song has a lot of good memories attached to it.

Stuart: I remember, I went to Australia, and you said:

Madonna: "Play the song when you're spinning." It was like an experiment.

Stuart: And so I called you from the club when I was playing it, and just kind of dialed the phone and held it there for like seven minutes, 'cause that's how long it was at that time.

Madonna: And everybody went mad, and it was so exciting and glorious to hear that enthusiasm from the crowd. And then I was just playing it for everybody. I remember, I was living in London, and I had this driver that that worked for me probably for 2 weeks. I had to sit in the front seat with him because I felt like I had to like, show him how to drive the car.

Hrishikesh: *(Laughs)*

Madonna: And it was a little bit disconcerting 'cause London's really crazy to drive in. But, like, to distract him, 'cause I think he was sweating bullets, so I put this CD in the car, I said, "Check this out! What do you think of this?" And he's like, "Oh my God, this is so good! This is really good!" *(laughs)*. He almost crashed into a stop sign. And I fired him the next week, but he was so blown away by the song he couldn't drive the car in a straight line. So I thought that was a good sign.

*(Synth plays)*

Madonna: I have been really fortunate over the years to have great collaborators to work with, and Stuart being one of them. I guess I'm kind of old-fashioned that way; I like to find people to work with and develop a relationship with them. And it's all about chemistry, and you have to be a little mad, and a little bit crazy, and super musical, and not think in a limited way, and have an incredible sense of humor, which Stuart has.

Stuart: You have this thing about you as well that you do, is that you are able to bring the best out of people that you work with. I certainly became better at what I do through working with you.

Madonna: It doesn't happen a lot, but every once in a while people collide, you know what I mean? Creative minds collide and end up making magic together.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Hung Up", by Madonna, in its entirety.  
*("Hung Up" by MADONNA)*



Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit [songexploder.net/madonna](https://songexploder.net/madonna). You'll find links to stream or download this song, and you can watch the music video.

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were made by me. I produced this episode with Craig Ealy with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith and production assistance from Chloe Parker, Nick Song, and Mary Dolan.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network independent, listener supported, artist owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](https://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](https://songexploder.net/shirt). I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.