

Song Exploder
Feist - In Lightning
Episode 254

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.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

Feist is a singer and songwriter from Canada. She put out her first solo album in 1999. She's won 11 Juno awards, including two for Artist of the Year, and she has four Grammy nominations. She's also been a member of the band Broken Social Scene since 2001. In April 2023, she put out her sixth album, *Multitudes*. And for this episode, I talked to her about how she made the opening song from that album, called "In Lightning."

(Vocals: "And in lightning / Flashes flash to show our natural age / And the lightning, it lights me up / To be as God as I say")

Feist: I am Leslie Feist.

Just inside the Rockies, there's a place called Banff. And there's a huge Centre for the Arts there. And there's this Artist Residency program, where they'll just give you a cabin in the middle of the woods. I was offered one of those retreats, which was 10 days, and I thought, Oh, this is fantastic, I'm gonna just try to get my wits about me, in terms of what I was working on.

But there were plenty of hours in the day where I was faced with these uncomfortable thoughts.

I started to feel that there was just a tendency that I would receive a curveball; some sort of input from a relationship or from a circumstance. And, no matter what came at me, I tended to essentially absorb it as negative information, instead of positive. Like, as if I'm playing defense my whole life instead of offense, instead of initiating anything.

When you have a realization like that, like, it shakes the foundation. Because you start to realize, Oh wait, I'm... I am the author here.

And then I started to be interested in the way that I was thinking about my own role in my own life. Making my own truth. And that began by trying to watch myself interpret something that was benign as negative, or watching myself fall into patterns of communication where I would essentially be on my back foot, or something?

So it was kind of the beginning of me learning that I can make this better.

(“In Lightning” by FEIST - demo)

So I was in this little cabin and I'd brought a guitar, my pedal board, and uh, yeah, I was just spinning for 10 days, trying to find something [laughs].

(“In Lightning” by FEIST - demo)

(Vocals: “And in lightning / [...] to feel how love should feel / And in lightning, [...] / Thunder loves me back”)

I'm breaking out in a sweat that I'm revealing this to the world [laughs], but this is like the most private moment ever. I mean, I had fun going through my phone looking at voice memos, trying to understand how it happened.

My old friend Mocky, who's made every record with me, we have this sort of stream of consciousness game, called “Singing.”

And, the way I frame it, years later, to people I try to teach the game to, is, write a song right now, stream of consciousness, and pretend you *wrote* it five years ago, and now you're just trying to *remember* it. Like, so there's not the pressure of coming up with something brand new. Like, it's way less pressure [chuckles]. It's like, I'm just gonna try to remember something that already exists. And so, it's almost like now there's some sense of collaboration – with who, with what, I don't know. But now there's something that, I'm not alone in this room, all of a sudden. There's an idea that's sort of waving at me from an oasis way in the distance.

And so, I did that at the Banff center a lot, where I just pressed record and just started to sing.

(“In Lightning” by FEIST - demo)

(Vocals “And the lightning / Flashes flash of all our natural age / And in lightning / Make me get my energy for days...”)

And so, in that, one of those initial Songings, I said *in lightning*. And, I mean, lightning is something that strikes. It happens in a split second. The idea of being *in it*, like a flash of inspiration; a blast of complete illumination, and seeing what's in and around you... if you could sustain the being inside of a bolt of lightning — what is in there?

(“In Lightning” by FEIST - demo)

I completed a whole demo of the song, and then I took the solo sketch version of it to Todd Dahlhoff and Amir Yaghmai, who are two of my live bandmates. I wanted to do sort of a very, very tiny, small, show in the round.

(demo cont'd)

And then a lot of the tone was found in that live show, which we did, you know, something like a hundred times.

So I was the only rhythm in the live show, you know, acoustic guitar.

And the song was sort of glued to that form.

So, you know, basically, we recorded a version of it that was very much like the live show had been.

(*"In Lightning" by FEIST - demo*)

(Vocals: *"Oh!! / Lala / Lala / Lala-oooh"*)

But then it felt like, okay, we're making a record now, and it can be anything.

We tracked the bulk of the record, I'd say 90% of it, at a house way up in Ukiah, in Northern California, in the Redwoods.

We just cleared out the furniture, and built a studio there. And we lived out there for about two weeks: Robbie Lackritz; Michael Harris, our engineer; Mocky, who co-produced with Robbie and myself; Todd Dahlhoff, who plays bass and a lot of other instruments; Amir Yaghmai, who plays violin and a lot of other instruments.

That would be the core group of us. Also, through the pandemic, Mike Mills, the film director... we call ourselves "art pen pals," you know, I'd send him early demos, and he'd send me, sort of, art prompts.

And so, I asked him to come into the studio and hear where we were at.

(*"In Lightning" by FEIST - demo*)

Mike said, *There's something feral that's missing. He said, Hey, look, you are not a drummer. Go over there and just blast your body at the drums as if you were playing a guitar, but with some sticks in your hand. But don't try to do it perfectly, just... You want the electricity, you want the jolt of it.*

(*"In Lightning" by FEIST*)

(drums)

A few weeks after that, just by accident, Michael Harris, our engineer who tracked the record, he opened the session and pressed the space bar.

And then there was a perfect glitch where, instead of, "boom, ka, ka, ka, ka, boom" it went:

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(drums)

Our heads swung around to look at each other, like our eyes were wide, because what the hell was going on? And we only heard it for about three seconds, or something. But we both understood what we'd just heard, and so we just, then we recreated it, and that's what became the ultimate, finished version of the drums.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(Vocals: "Oh- lala / Oh- lala / Oh- lala / Oooh / When in lightning flashes flash / And thunder loves me back")

I'd say the song was found through basically muting and muting and combing away as much as we could until what was left was boiled down to its essence.

As soon as we muted the guitar, all of a sudden there was this new sort of space.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(Vocals: "And in lightning / Flashes flash to show our natural age")

There's such a, a built-in idea of, especially for women reaching a certain age, that there's a diminishment that's just innately bound to happen. There's like a devaluing culturally, or something like that. But that's just so messed up. You know, in the sense that, like, our value is mounting up, and we're learning so much more about ourselves, and yet... There is a battle, even in my own mind, there's a battle to try to claim the natural age.

You know, the more time that's passed through me, the more I have the capacity to understand the things that I'm trying to figure out. And it's natural. It's okay [chuckles].

We invited Shahzad Ismaily, and Gabe Noel, who are two... we were calling them wild cards. They're just incredible players, and we could just unleash them on the tracks and see whatever they wanted to find, you know?

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(bass note)

Shahzad carries around his Moog Rogue with him all the time. A little synthesizer. And so what you hear is like a single note that kind of opens up and becomes two notes, and that's him.

(bass note cont'd, into two notes)

And so, that's Gabe Noel. I mean, honestly, every instrument that Gabe played on this record, I don't know what they are. I don't know what anything is.

He invented a new type of guitar called a "cellar" that is strung like a cello, but he plays it almost like a giant bass mandolin. And he runs it through his pedal board.

He did a lot of that, and we drained most of it away, and just left these things that didn't sound exactly like an instrument.

I mean that was sort of the point, was to take away any signifiers of live band setup. Instead, we're just finding these essential electric shocks.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(Vocals: "And the lightning / It lights me up to be as god as I say")

All of us have associations with that word, like capital G god. But there's something so mysterious and incredible about the unlikelihood of us being here at all.

In a lyrical sense, it becomes an opening, you know, in a way that word is usually not associated to, like, a 47-year-old Canadian woman, or something, "God," you know? But it's possible. It's possible to just name it, claim it, just make it as simple as that.

(Vocals: "And the lightning / It lights me up to be as god as I say")

I think that backups can serve to just fortify a single subjective thought, and other times it can split the idea into, this is an idea held by many.

(Vocals: "And then to lightning I belong / Like electricity")

It's kind of like a call and response, in a way. It becomes like a single voice multiplies itself to be many voices.

(Vocals: "And if I'm frightened / It's just because of the power vested in me")

I had always been particularly drawn to the string arrangements on Mocky's record, Key Change, and that arranger is Miguel Atwood-Ferguson,. So Mocks suggested that we bring him in.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(strings, into key change)

The key change was discovered live at the show.

I discovered if I played the song on the fifth fret in this open tuning, and then immediately put the capo on the third fret in time for the solo, it became like a very angular key change.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(guitar solo)

It was really difficult to try to find the tone of the guitar, because I didn't really want it to sound like classic distorted, electric guitar solo. Like, it just feels a bit, sort of, norm-core.

And so, I'm not an engineer on Pro Tools, but I sat down and I understood at least enough how to do hard cuts. I would just watch the sine wave until it was the end of the note.

And then I would cut it, like [vocalizes] "buh-buh-buh-buh / buh-buh-buh-buh," like just put, like hard cuts in there.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

And then we come back to the original key.

I saw that as the, the calm after the storm. You know, the raindrops are dripping off of the tree, and there's this moment of, is the storm done? Did it pass?

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(recorder)

I don't know why, I love an alto recorder. If you just blow into them very, very gently, they just sound very beautiful. I can't play a, a woodwind or a reed instrument. But I can play a recorder.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

(Vocals: "And in lightning I can see / Just as well in the dark / The lightning asks if I know the way / In the intermittent bright / And if I say yes or many yeses / It cracks")

All the lyrics, they're speaking about electricity, but they're kind of speaking about owning of my own power in any given moment.

This song is a, in a way it's like a manifesto or a declaration to try to situate myself inside power.

I haven't necessarily gotten there, but there's something in my arsenal now, or something, where I've turned an intangible into something more understandable for myself.

If I can just hear myself incant these thoughts again and again over the years, some perspective shift will happen, eventually.

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

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And now, here's "In Lightning," by Feist, in its entirety.

("In Lightning" by FEIST)

Visit songexploder.net/feist to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "In Lightning," and you can watch the music video.

This episode of Song Exploder was produced by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and 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.

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If you liked this episode, and you're looking for another Song Exploder episode to listen to after this, check out Laura Marling's episode, from May of 2020. I'd put Laura Marling and Feist back-to-back on the same mixtape, and they both talk about some similar themes. You can find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at songexploder.net/episodes, or on whatever podcast app you might use.