

Song Exploder
Laufey - From The Start
Episode 259

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.

Laufey is a jazz artist, but I'm not sure how much that label matters to all the people who listen to her. I read this headline in Vice from a few years ago that said: "the musical genre is dead, gen z killed it." TikTok and Spotify algorithms aren't serving music to audiences based on genre, and so it's easier than ever to ignore genre and just take what you want, like the entire musical world is a giant breakfast buffet at a fancy hotel. But here are a couple of genre-related stats: Laufey was Spotify's most streamed jazz artist of 2022. And her new album just broke Spotify's record for the most streams of a jazz album in a single day. But let me back up.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - guitar riff, instrumental continues)

Laufey is a singer and songwriter, originally from Iceland. She studied piano and cello as a kid. When she was 15, she was a guest soloist with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. She went to Berklee College of Music in Boston, and that's when she started writing songs. While she was still a student, she had a number one hit on Icelandic radio. Her first album debuted at number one on Billboard's Alternative New Artist chart. Her second album, *Bewitched*, came out in September 2023. And for this episode, I talked to Laufey about the breakout hit from that new album: a song called "From The Start."

("From The Start" by LAUFEY)

(Vocals: "That when I talk to you oh, Cupid walks right through / And shoots an arrow through my heart / And I sound like a loon, but don't you feel it too? / Confess I loved you from the start")

Laufey: My name is Laufey.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY)

I remember I was sitting on my couch, just in my apartment. I'd been listening to a lot of bossa nova records. And I thought I would try my hand at writing something in that style.

There are some, like, very playful little songs.

I have on my Notes app, on my phone, just a long list of song titles that I think would be cool, that I literally write down when I'm, like, on the train. Oftentimes it

happens right before I go to sleep. I'll be like, (gasp) wait! This could be a good song title!

So I had the song title for a while, and I was like, okay, what can be from the start?

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - demo guitar chords)

This was recorded on my phone (chuckles).

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - demo guitar and vocals)

(Demo vocals: "Don't you notice how / I get quiet when there's no one else around? / Me and you and awkward silence")

I started playing guitar like four years ago, maybe? I'd barely dare to call myself a guitar player just because it feels almost, like, offensive to the 20 years of cello and piano lessons that I've taken.

But it's my favorite instrument to write on. Because I know the piano so well, there're more limitations on guitar, almost, so I can focus on the writing.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - demo)

(Demo vocals: "And I sound like a loon, but don't you feel it too? / Confess I loved you from the start")

The title is usually the last word in the chorus that I write, so I know what I'm writing towards.

I wanted it to be this confession of love. And it was after I wrote the chorus where I was like, okay, how do I make this interesting? What's a feeling that I've felt before that would kind of make sense with this? And I realized it was this unrequited love feeling.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - demo)

(Demo vocals: "What's a girl to do? / Lying on my bed, staring into the blue / Unrequited, terrifying / Love is driving me a bit insane / Have to fix it, so I guess / I'll tell you this today")

I mean... I had a bit of an experience where I, where I liked a friend and... and you think that they like you... And then all of a sudden they're talking about someone they like. This new soulmate that they've found. And you just get this

kind of, like, sinking feeling, and you're kind of like, almost a little bit embarrassed. That's the feeling I wanted to illustrate.

And I kind of imagine it as these two people sitting on a couch. Or me and this friend who I'm in love with, sitting on a couch and... just describing it kind of word for word.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - demo)

(Demo vocals: "My friend I loved you / My friend I loved you / Confess I loved you from the start")

I grew up very classically trained and actually kind of always thought I'd become, you know, an orchestra musician. Like, my mother's a violinist, and her parents were both classical music professors as well. So it was kind of just my lineage.

Growing up in classical music, I think I took myself quite seriously and over-thought a lot of the things that I was doing.

When I started learning jazz music and singing jazz music, I was just very much a classically trained musician at this point. And that's all I knew how to do. You know, like, look at a piece of music and learn it.

When I got to Berklee I kind of found a, a new type of freedom within music, just through seeing other kids who hadn't grown up with a classical background, and were a lot less strict with themselves, kind of allowing themselves to mix and match sounds and styles and not take it too seriously.

So even though I was a cello student, I had started singing by then, and I listened to a lot of jazz and also pop, and I knew I wanted to bring all these worlds together.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - guitar)

So I brought this song to my producer, Spencer.

Hrishikesh: That's producer and songwriter, Spencer Stewart.

Laufey: Because he just understands exactly what I want to do. He understands the jazz references and the classical references.

We did one of my songs the first day that we worked together, and I remember thinking, wow, this guy just gets me.

I knew I wanted it to sound kind of reminiscent of an old bossa nova recording. I wanted every instrument to be recorded live.

So, Spencer played guitar and bass on this.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - bass)

And the drums.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - bass and drums)

We recorded most of the album at Spencer's home studio.

It's kind of like my comfort place. It feels very much like a living room and not overwhelming at all.

And I feel like I can be my most creative in spaces like that, instead of in, like, a dark, humongous studio, where I could get a little bit more stressed.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY)

(Vocals: "Don't you notice how / I get quiet when there's no one else around?")

Bossa nova-style singing is, like, kind of, it feels like storytelling, you know, it's very – it's quite spoken.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - solo vocals)

(Vocals: "Oh, the burning pain / Listening to you harp on 'bout some new soulmate")

And the lyric, "oh, the burning pain," to me that kind of sounds like it's almost harking back to this like, dramatic time when women were mad, you know?

And they were like, *Oh, the burning pain!* Almost like this Renaissance kind of reaction to it. But yeah. "Oh, the burning pain. Listening to you harp on 'bout some new soulmate."

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - solo vocals)

(Vocals: "She's so perfect, "blah, blah, blah.")

I really like that lyric. I just think it's so, it's so funny and so directly telling of how it feels in that moment.

Dramatic and petty. That's, that's what (chuckles) I'm aiming to do.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano chords)

And then I played the piano.

It's recorded on, like, a felted piano, which brings this kind of playful touch.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano chords and melody, vocals)

(Vocals: "And I sound like a loon, but don't you feel it too? / Confess I loved you from the start.")

The word *loon* is just this old fashioned way of describing someone being crazy. And I think it's so cute. It's kinda like a fun word to bring back to today's vocabulary. You know, I have old fashioned word choices just as a human, so I think that seeps into my writing.

I definitely, I've been told I speak quite formally sometimes. I don't know why. Maybe because English is my third language.

Well, my mother's Chinese and my father's Icelandic. So my first language was Mandarin, was Chinese. And my second language is Icelandic. I started learning English when I was about five or six. But I think I'm starting to think in English and, and so it comes the most naturally to me. It makes the most sense.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - drums, bass, scatting vocals; instruments fade out to just vocals)

Ella Fitzgerald was like my idol growing up. So, as a part of my vocal training, I used to transcribe a lot of, like Ella Fitzgerald scat solos.

People ask me a lot, like, how do I learn how to write jazz music? And I'm like, just transcribe your favorite solos. Like, just listen.

*(Vocals: *scatting*)*

Hrishikesh: When you recorded that scatting part, was that hard for you? Did you have to do a lot of takes, or is that something you always have in your back pocket? Like, could you just bust that out right now?

Laufey: I guess I could bust it out right now... You kinda like flip your voice up, like...

*(Vocals: *scatting*)*

(Laughs) You kinda have to like, let go and hope that your voice will catch you, kind of (laughs).

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano part)

I heard that (sings piano part) "da-da-da, da-da-da, da-da-da," I wanted to have that kind of rhythm going against the guitar.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano part with guitar)

It's kind of meant to be this like, playful, like interwoven melody.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano, guitar, cello; other instruments fade out to solo cello)

That's just me playing cello. Just lots of layers of cello.

The cello's such a versatile instrument.

You can get really high pitches and, and you get the bass as well. So you can kind of create almost like a string orchestra-like sound, with just one instrument.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - cello)

We record very close to the mic. And I'm very intentional about getting that kind of wispy sound.

So I play like, you know, higher up on the bridge, and want to capture that kind of like (imitates cello) "Fffffhfffh." It almost sounds like an ocean breeze to me.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - cello melody)

It's like a swell, almost. It's like the swelling of a heart.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - cello melody)

And it's following the pentatonic scale. It kind of has this like, Chinese sound to it, which I kind of see as this way of, um, showing my Chinese side a little bit.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - cello melody)

For the outro, I wanted it to sound all of a sudden really different from the rest of the song.

Because the end for me was like, okay... Jokes aside, tricks aside, this is how I feel. Just this full confession: I've loved you from the start.

And I wanted it to end only strings and voice. Which I always feel like is, is me to the core. Those are my two voices: cello and singing.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - outro cello and voice)

(Vocals: "I know I've loved you from the start.")

Growing up, I listened to almost only classical and jazz music – and then Taylor Swift. And looking back, I'm like, why was it specifically Taylor Swift?

And it's because she wrote these lyrics that were quite literal, and quite relatable. I wanted to hear that within the music that I made. Like, when I wrote music, I wanted to be able to bring that kind of feeling.

Those jazz standards were written by Gershwin, and Berlin, and Cole Porter — and these are my favorite composers, and writers, but they wrote these songs in the 30s and the 40s. They're all, like, old men who wrote it for musicals. So as beautiful as they are, and I, and I take a lot from their craft, like, it loses this sense of relatability.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY - piano, guitar, cello)

The day I released the song, it got a million streams in the first day. And I remember I was just gawking at my phone. I was like, what the hell is happening? And I just remember thinking like, wow. I don't think many people think of it as like a bossa nova song, or a standard. I think they just hear a song.

And I think that's so cool.

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

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And now, here's "From The Start" by Laufey, in its entirety.

("From The Start" by LAUFEY)

Visit songexploder.net/laufey to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "From The Start," and you can watch the music video.

If you liked this episode, and you want to listen to another artist who uses a lot of elements of jazz in their music, check out my episode with Norah Jones, from 2017. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at songexploder.net, or wherever you listen.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, 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.