

Song Exploder
Alvvays - Archie, Marry Me
Episode 260

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.

I love origin stories. This episode isn't just about how a song got made, it's a story of how the making of that song led to a band being formed: The band Alvvays.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS)

Alvvays is from Toronto. Their first album came out in 2014, and they've put out two other albums since then. In Canada, they've won the Juno Award for Alternative Album of the Year, and all three of their albums have been shortlisted for the Polaris Music Prize.

Their first song was also one of their biggest hits. It's called "Archie, Marry Me." Rolling Stone and Stereogum named it one of the best songs of the last decade. So, for this episode, I talked about it with Molly Rankin and Alec O'Hanley from the band. The two of them are pretty quiet about their relationship other than being bandmates, but they told me a lot about the song, which I would count nowadays as an indie rock classic.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS)

(Vocals: "Hey, hey, marry me, Archie / Hey, hey, marry me, Archie")

Molly: I'm Molly Rankin from Alvvays. I sing and write songs and play guitar.

Alec: I'm Alec O'Hanley, and I do all those things too, just to a lesser degree.

Molly: I grew up in Cape Breton. And Alec grew up on Prince Edward Island, this province in Canada.

Alec: Molly had sung on some records of some friends.

Molly: And then Alec and I began this friendship of sharing what we had written.

And so, I knew Alec for a few years before he asked me to live on Prince Edward Island for a summer to just play music. There were so many bands and exciting things happening that it was like this other universe to me. And so I did actually move to Prince Edward Island, to just become part of that world.

It was definitely a rushed thing to do. Like it, I think it was concerning to the people in my life that I moved there on a whim.

Alec: We were still pretty fresh at the time (chuckles).

Molly: So, 2011 is when the idea popped into my head. I was waiting tables at this really busy pub. I was working so much and feeling pretty lost. And feeling stuck about where I was in my life, and just waiting tables and having, like, rib sauce all over my arms all the time, from carrying plates of ribs out to people. And I was observing a lot of other people's trajectories, whether that was getting a real job, or getting married, buying a house.

Alec was with one of his bands in Australia for the month, and I'd just gotten a phone call from him, which was really rare, because we were on opposite sides of the world.

Alec: I remember being in a suburban Sydney, Australia basement, and feeling pretty low.

Molly: The conversation I had with Alec just made me want to depict these two people that had nothing really figured out and just wanted to take this leap together that didn't really make sense to other people at the time.

So I'd got off of the phone with Alec, and I had a classical guitar and plugged in this USB mic into Garageband, and just made this little demo.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – demo: guitar and vocals)

(Demo vocals: "You've expressed explicitly your contempt for matrimony...")

Yeah, I'm personally not ready to revisit that demo, but I'm happy that everyone else can.

(Demo vocals: "... And will not risk the alimony / We spend our days locked in a room, content inside a bubble / And in the nighttime we go out...")

(Laughs) It's like listening to a 10 year old. It's crazy.

(Demo vocals: "...Scour the streets for trouble / Hey, hey, marry me, Archie / Hey, hey, marry me, Archie")

I feel like Archie isn't that common of a name, but Archie just fit perfectly.

To me, it's the name of like an old man who plays cards, like, who plays cribbage at a kitchen table and smokes cigarettes. And I knew a couple of Archies that were younger, and they were kind of like young old men.

So I sent it off to Alec, and the body of the email said, "Who wrote this?" Meaning I thought someone else had already written this song and I had just subconsciously lifted it. So I was really just asking, who's done this before? Whose song is this? And –

Alec: What am I ripping off?

Molly: Yeah, exactly. And I think Alec just said, it's yours.

Alec: We traded demos quite frequently, just whatever we were working in Garageband. That was kind of a good way to stay in each other's brains.

So I got this demo from Molly and was just kind of floored.

Because there are some songs where you wonder, oh, could this survive? You know?

But this was not one of those, it was just a drop dead hit. (Laughs) I thought it was so funny and charming, and it just marked a shift for me mentally.

Like, okay, we need to start a proper band and make sure people hear this song in particular cuz it's so cool.

So we wrangled your best friend Kerri. We insisted she play keyboards for us.

And we played in Austin, at South By Southwest, under your solo name, Molly Rankin.

Molly: And we ended up just playing it live for a while, before we even formally recorded it.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – live performance)

(Live vocals: "Hey, hey, marry me, Archie / Hey, hey, A-R-C-H-I-E, hey")

We played enough shows and were traveling so much from Prince Edward Island to Toronto. We finally just agreed that we needed to move to Toronto.

Alec: We all moved October 1st, 2011.

Molly: I was working in a Smoothie Hut. Alec worked at a poutine restaurant called Poutini's, and Kerri came too.

"Archie, Marry Me" was one of my first attempts at really trying to execute writing something that I would listen to, because up until then, I think I was writing a lot of stuff that I wouldn't go out of my way to hear. I think I wanted it to be a kind of classic pop song.

I liked the idea of two people who are kind of out of control, and don't have their ducks in a row. And it doesn't mean that the feelings they have for one another are lesser than a couple who has everything planned and figured out.

Alec: It's striking, listening to your original demo, how much of it was there, intact, in the first thought.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – demo: guitar and vocals)

(Demo vocals: "We spend our days locked in a room, content inside a bubble / And in the nighttime we go out and scour the streets for trouble")

Hrishikesh: I was actually surprised when you told me that you recorded this in Garageband, because I thought it was maybe a, a, like a cassette recorder or something.

Alec: The megaphone filter on Garageband was superduper sick –

Molly: (laughs)

Alec: – back in the day.

Molly: (laughs)

Alec: We were making heavy use of that.

You know, we were into bad-sounding stuff at that point, like –

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Alec: – we wanted it to sound like it was recorded, like, by some dude in a shed. So we found some dude in a shed.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - synths)

Molly: I was such a huge fan of Chad VanGalen's work. He's a songwriter and he probably has close to, I wanna say 10 of his own albums out.

Alec: And he built his own circuit-bent synths and instruments.

Molly: He recorded all of his solo stuff. And if we could just have him see some of the songs through his eyes or hear them through his ears, I just thought it would be a cool combination.

But he's sort of a recluse, like he was just this really elusive character. But he emailed me back, and he said he was – he was down.

Alec: So we went to Calgary and, I don't think we had any idea what we were getting into, exactly.

Molly: There wasn't a lot of gear there, but he's incredibly resourceful with what he did have.

Alec: We had 8-tracks to work with, on this Tascam 388 tape recorder that we still use today.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - guitar)

Molly: You know, he has his own idiosyncratic way of capturing stuff, and I think that it – it is a big part of the sound of that song.

That's me playing guitar there.

Alec: Molly had her Fender Duo Sonic, which she found in a pawn shop.

I was playing my Jazzmaster.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - guitar)

We'd been listening to a lot of Teenage Fanclub.

And we had a favorite strumming pattern and that's (imitates guitar) "*Jan-Jan, Jan-Jan-Jan-Jan, Jan-Jan-Jan, Jan-Jan-Jan, Jan-Jan,*"

It's just sort of the, for lack of a better term, slacker, strumming pattern that Teenage Fanclub always uses.

I think we knew simplicity would be our friend. But we do try to find different voicings.

Molly: So, that sort of higher-on-the-neck interplay is Alec.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - guitar)

We didn't really know that we were a band. And Chad also didn't really know that.

Alec: Yeah, we couldn't afford to bring the whole band out.

Molly: So when we showed up with all of these ideas, I think he was really surprised. And he was kind enough to sort of lend the people who played in his band, like Eric Hamelin, who was available to play drums.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - drums)

But it was just such a crazy time. because his partner was giving birth, so the one take that we got from Eric was for "Archie, Marry Me," but I was really happy that he was a part of the record cuz we loved him.

Alec: I remember Chad being so proud of the drum tones he was getting. With these three microphones, kick, snare, and mono overhead.

You can hear the bleed in the drum tracks of Molly's guitar and, and singing, cuz we were all playing in one room.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – bass)

Molly: This is our first bass player, Brian Murphy.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – vocals and drums)

(Vocals: "During the summer, take me sailing out on the Atlantic / I won't set my sights on other seas, there is no need to panic")

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – birds)

Alec: Chad was deep into, like, field recording. And we were like, oh let's put some birds on the intro! It'll be like, like the Atlantic, or something.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS – isolated vocals)

(Vocals: "You've expressed explicitly your contempt for matrimony / You've student loans to pay and will not risk the alimony")

Molly: Writing funny lyrics is usually what comes most natural to me. I feel like, if you're going to be extremely earnest, it really helps to offset some of that with a little snark.

I sung the vocal through an RE20 and a space echo.

Alec: The engineer we were working with at the time, Jeff McMurrich, said Molly had a "laser squirrel voice."

And this was the one mic that tamed the squirrel, as it were.

Molly: Yeah, the birth of a complex (laughs).

Alec: (Laughs) His words, not mine.

Molly: (Laughs).

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS)

(Vocals: "So honey, take me by the hand and we can sign some papers / Forget the invitations, floral arrangements and bread makers")

"Forget the invitations, floral arrangements, and bread makers." Which is an absurd lyric.

I'm not sure that appliances found its way into any other song.

The song is very earnest while also poking fun at the whole ritual of marriage and, in some ways, sort of railing against that. But I thought it *could* work, if it was funny.

(Vocals: "Too late to go out, too young to stay in / They're talking about us living in sin")

The bridge, I remember coming up with in a room full of other bands that were all packing up and getting ready to go to play this festival in Montreal.

I needed to figure out a bridge so we could play it, the next day, at this festival.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS - lead and backing vocals)

(Vocals: "Too late to go out, too young to stay in / They're talking about us living in sin")

Alec: That's a rare "Alec" backup vocal. Harmony vocals are often good if they're fairly monotonous. So, that's one thing I do well (chuckles).

Molly: "Too late to go out, too young to stay in, they're talking about us living in sin."

You know, these two people were dreamers, which I find, you know, a really beautiful, romantic idea, whether or not it works out, you know?

(Vocals: "Hey, hey, marry me, Archie")

We didn't become Alvvays officially until the record was finished.

Alec: Chad explicitly said to us, this is a band record. This is not a solo project. You know, you guys should come up with a name (chuckles). So, it's kind of the island we founded the band upon.

(Vocals: "Hey, hey, A-R-C-H-I-E, hey")

Hrishikesh: So, do you hear a lot of stories from people saying this song was an important part of their love lives, or their weddings?

Molly: All the time.

I get a lot of stories about proposals. We get a lot of requests for us to announce at our shows that people are going to be engaged. There's a ton of that. I get proposed to all the time at shows.

Hrishikesh: You get proposed to?

Molly: Yes, yes, I do. I, (laughs) I've sealed my own fate in writing this song in that I do get proposed to a lot.

Alec: It's usually a British man yelling *Marry me, Molly!*

Molly: (Laughs). I have to say that if I ever got married, I don't think I would have a wedding,

I just think it's too much attention for me. Saying something really earnest in front of all the people I love.

Alec: Yeah, we do that five nights a week, anyway, so.

Molly: I was pretty wide-eyed and optimistic when I wrote that song. And while I don't feel completely down on anything, I've, I've lived a lot more, and I don't see things through the same lens necessarily. Like, I, I do feel like a kind of a withered old man sometimes.

Alec: You've turned into Archie?

Molly: Yeah, yeah (laughs). When all's said and done, I do like a good wedding. Just not for me.

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

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And now, here's "Archie, Marry Me," by Alvveys, in its entirety.

("Archie, Marry Me," by ALVVAYS)

Visit songexploder.net/alvveys to learn more. That's "Alvveys" with two Vs, instead of a W. You'll find links to buy or stream "Archie, Marry Me" and you can watch the music video.

If you liked this episode, you might like Maggie Rogers' episode from 2017. Alvveys opened for Maggie Rogers on some of her tour dates this summer, and Maggie's episode, about the song "Alaska," is also kind of an origin story. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at songexploder.net, or wherever you listen.

This episode was made 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.