

**Song Exploder**  
**Rhiannon Giddens - You Louisiana Man**  
**Episode 268**

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.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS)*

Rhiannon Giddens is one of those people where I feel like they have to start inventing new awards because she's already won all of them. She's got multiple Grammys; she won the Pulitzer Prize for an opera she co-wrote, called *Omar*; she's a MacArthur Genius; and the new Beyonce song "Texas Hold Em," that features the banjo? That's Rhiannon Giddens playing the banjo. I guess that's not technically an award, but it feels like one to me.

Rhiannon Giddens has released five solo albums since 2015, and before that, she was a member of the Grammy-winning band the Carolina Chocolate Drops. She is now also the artistic director of the Silk Road Ensemble, the musical supergroup that Yo-Yo Ma founded.

In 2023, Rhiannon released an album called *You're The One*, and I talked to her about a song she wrote for it, called "You Louisiana Man," which was nominated for a Grammy for Best American Roots Performance.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS)*

*(Vocals: "I never knew that things were gonna get so far / I never knew it / I never knew that you were gonna break my heart, you / You Louisiana man")*

Rhiannon: My name is Rhiannon Giddens.

*(music fades out)*

I was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the central part of the state.

Hrishikesh: And what was your life like in terms of music? Did you play a lot of music when you were growing up?

Rhiannon: You know, I was surrounded by a lot of music. I picked up a few guitar chords from my dad, he was a guitar player, but that was kind of it, until I was like, my senior year in high school. That's when I kind of decided I wanted to be a, a singer.

So I started auditioning for schools. And I went to Oberlin Conservatory.

Hrishikesh: At that time, did you have this idea of like, *I want to be an opera singer?*

Rhiannon: Totally. I mean, I was gonna sing at the Met! And I was in a lot of operas at Oberlin. So it was definitely, I was on the track. You go there, and then you go to a grad school, and then you start winning competitions, and then you start getting cast, you know.

I completed the first part of that, which was to go to Oberlin (chuckles). I didn't do any of the rest of it (chuckles).

Hrishikesh: This is, because I'm trying to have a better understanding of connecting the dots... Like, how do you go from *I'm gonna be an opera singer, I'm gonna perform at the Met*, to playing fiddle and banjo?

Rhiannon: All of it started with contra dance, actually. 'Cause when I went to Oberlin, I saw a flier for "English country dance." And I'm a Jane Austen nut, and that's what they do in Jane Austen novels, is English country dance.

And I was like, oh, I wanna learn how to do that! And so I went, but it was actually a *contra* dance, which is an American art form, descended from English country dance. And there was a live band. And I was like, oh my God, this is so fun! So I started going to the contra dances at Oberlin. And then I went back down to Greensboro after I graduated, and found the contra dance scene. And that's when I started, like, hearing New England fiddle music, Canadian fiddle music, like all of this stuff, and kind of going, this is amazing.

I joined a Celtic band. It was like a advertisement, you know, we're looking for a lead singer. And I was like, okay!

And then I decided I wanted to pick up the fiddle.... And then banjo started to creep in.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - banjo)*

Hrishikesh: Do you remember when you first started thinking about "You Louisiana Man?"

*(banjo cont'd)*

Rhiannon: I remember sitting at the kitchen table and I started writing these words: "You turned my head, tripped up my mind, you Louisiana man."

*(add vocals )*

*(Vocals: "You turned my head / Tripped up my mind / You Louisiana man / You burned my bed / Lit up my sky / You Louisiana man.")*

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me, what was it that you were feeling that led to those words?

Rhiannon: It was anger. It's like, how many times have you struck up a friendship with somebody that then went way further than you thought? Romantic or not. You

know, you're like, oh, hey, let's have a coffee. And then, like, two months later you're like, telling each other your deepest, darkest secrets.

And then that person has all the power to destroy you (chuckles). You know what I mean? If, if they want. And that's really vulnerable.

You know, and you get mad at people. But it's like, you're really mad at yourself for, for staying in it past when you should have, or for not letting it go. But in a song, it's much funner (chuckles) to be mad at a person. So... I was mad at you Louisiana man.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - isolated vocals)*

*(Vocals: "You stole my breath / You took my soul / You Louisiana Man")*

Hrishikesh: Had you ever written a song from this kind of emotional place before?

Rhiannon: Um...I was definitely carving out new ground. I mean, I was just in a very confused time in my life. Was feeling things in a very intense way... And so, I was thinking, I just gotta write this down. It was a time when I was writing a lot of poetry. I kind of feel like it was almost a teenage (chuckles) delay.

Like, I didn't have a boyfriend 'til I was 23. And so I never did, you know, a lot of those sort of emotional things when I was a teenager. 'Cause I was just like this nerd reading books and, like, watching Jane Austen movies or whatever. But not really participating in life in that way. I was an observer. And so, I was kind of in the midst of, like, *life-life* (chuckles), you know? And not really knowing how to deal with it.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS)*

*(Vocals: "I never knew that things were gonna get so far / I never knew it / I never knew that you were gonna break my heart, you / You Louisiana man")*

This was written on the minstrel banjo, and I do that a lot is I find the tune on the banjo. And I often just double myself, when I'm singing.

It's just so beautiful and supportive to the voice. You can just hear there, they just go together so beautifully.

*(Vocals: "Oh / Oh-oh-oooh-oh-oh / Oh")*

So we made a demo. It was actually for the *Freedom Highway* sessions.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - 2016 demo)*

*(Demo vocals: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight")*

And that was a record that had a lot of my mission-based work. Like, my slave songs. So this song didn't really belong...

*(demo cont'd - fiddle comes in)*

You know what I mean? It just kind of felt a little too "party" (chuckles) for the sort of gravitas of that album.

*(demo cont'd - shakers come in)*

And it just didn't turn out. We didn't get it to where we wanted it to, so we just sat on it and that became the demo, that recording.

*(demo cont'd - vocals come in)*

*(Vocals: "I've wept my tears, and I'll move on / You Louisiana man / I never knew that things were gonna get so far / I never knew it...")*

Hrishikesh: So, can you tell me about what made it right to bring the song in for this one?

Rhiannon: You know, I worked on *Omar*, mine and Michael Abel's opera, for a total of five years. It's the story of a Islamic scholar from Senegal who's sold into slavery and ends up living as an enslaved man in North Carolina for over 50 years. Dies right before the Civil War.

I'm like, that's a heavy story. And all the things that I do are pretty serious and heavy. And so I was just like, ah, I just need to just have some fun, sing some love songs, some breakup songs, whatever. Just have a good time.

Hrishikesh: And so then, how did you end up working with Jack Splash as the producer?

Rhiannon: I felt like a lot of these songs needed a bigger palette than the folk and acoustic palettes that I've been really working with.

And really, meeting him, I just thought he had such a quick brain, and such a knowledge of all the different styles that I wanted to play in, and was willing to meet me halfway. You know, I was like, I don't wanna just throw these songs at you and then have it be you with a little bit of me. And I don't want it to be mostly me with a little bit of you, like put some beats on it or something. I want us to actually find a halfway point. And he was really into it.

So I brought some musicians that I've been working with, and he brought the musicians that he's been working with.

It was two discrete groups coming together and finding where everybody fit.

'Cause you had all of these different instruments. You had the Cajun fiddle...

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - solo fiddle)*

You hear the banjo...

*(solo banjo)*

You hear all of these super acoustic sounds... And then the more modern kind of drum beat...

*(add drums)*

The electric bass...

*(add electric bass)*

Everybody was just like, how's this gonna work? And then you start playing, and it's like, oh... *That's* how it's gonna work.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - cont'd)*

And I was like, "This is so cookin'. This is what I was missing. This is what this song needed."

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - cont'd, then ends)*

It was just so neat to hear those cross-rhythms, and how it just seamlessly worked with the freaking fretless banjo from 1858 (chuckles). You know what I mean? Like, these were people talking to each other with music.

And that's the way I like to do collaborations, you know? Each piece kind of fits in, in this really beautiful, nestled way, and nobody's covering anybody up. You're overlapping in a way that then highlights everybody.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - acoustic guitar with everything)*

But we can't have everybody playing all the time. The idea is that you create that energy on the floor, and then you just carve it out.

Irishikesh: Yeah, I thought it was interesting: listening to the tracks on their own, you can hear how the acoustic guitar kind of pops in and out. Like, it's edited in and out of the song.

Rhiannon: Yeah. Niwel Tsumbu, he played acoustic guitar on everything. And this is a great part, but like, you wouldn't have heard it anyway because there is all this other stuff going on. So you just take it out, and then just put it in where it needs to be.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - acoustic guitar with everything)*

*(Vocals: "You've left me here, and now you're gone / You Louisiana man")*

I love doing harmony vocals. You know, I used to sing with my sister. She was the lead and I was harmony. She's older than me. And so, that's actually my natural place, is I go to harmony first. I have to, like, force myself to sing lead.

So when I get to sing harmony with myself, like, and I know what I'm gonna be doing? I freaking love it.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - harmony vocals)*

*(" I never knew that things were gonna get so far / I never knew it / I never knew that you were gonna break my heart, you / You Louisiana man")*

*(bass fades up to solo)*

The bassline really captures the sort of agitation and kind of friction in the song. Where you can tell the protagonist is just like, trying to play it cool. Even at the end, which... You know, I generally tend to like to leave woman-oriented songs about men who've done them wrong or whatever, I generally like to leave it on a positive. Like, this thing happened, but I'm not gonna let it define me, or whatever. So at the end, you know:

*(Vocals: "I've wept my tears, and I'll move on / You Louisiana man")*

So she's like, yeah, yeah, yeah! But then underneath, it's like, (sings bass part) "Dun-dun-dun, dun-dun..."

Hrishikesh: So she's, lyrically you're saying, *I've moved on*. But then, the music hasn't actually changed along with it.

Rhiannon: I mean, I think I can speak for a lot of people who've been in relationships and they go, *I'm totally over this*. Are they totally over it? No. But you have to say it enough, until you *are* over it. You know, you keep repeating it until you've actually done it. So, you know, this protagonist is, she's not quite there, but like... she's stating an intention (laughs).

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - bass parts together)*

So that's upright bass *and* electric bass. That (sings bass part) "buh-dun-dun-dun-dun" you know, that's the electric bass.

*(electric bass)*

Yeah, T-Ray on bass. And I could see him from my booth, and I would just, like, watch his fingers fly, and just be like, what is going on right now... So good.

And then...

*(upright bass)*

That's on the upright. And that's Jason Sypher.

*(upright bass cont'd)*

Jason has played Cajun music, he's played Irish music. So he's been my bass player for a long time.

And they're coming from totally different musical worlds. White upright bass player, Black electric bass player, and their totally different genres, and (snaps fingers) they could work together, like, no problem.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - bass parts together)*

At the end of the song, I think everybody was just really digging on each other. There's this outro of just, it's like party time.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - outro)*

Then Jack had horns added.

*(horns)*

That was another moment where I was like, okay, this is freaking cool. This, I'm so glad we're doing this. You know, I would've never thought of that in a million years. And that's why you collaborate.

*(Vocals: "You've left me here, and now you're gone / You Louisiana man")*

You know, we have these relationships with people where they don't do what you want 'em to do (laughs). You know what I mean? And it's like, they ain't got to do what you want 'em to do because they grown people and they gonna do what they wanna do. But like, that doesn't stop us from wanting them to be different.

Hrishikesh: The person who this song is about...

Rhiannon: Mmm?

Hrishikesh: Do they know it's about them?

Rhiannon: They do. I sent it to them.

Hrishikesh: What was that like?

Rhiannon: Oh, it was funny. I was just like, I've been processing things and this is how it came out.

I was like, this is how I feel. And they were like, that's a great, that's great, that's a great song (chuckles).

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS - outro horns)*

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 "You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS, in its entirety.

*("You Louisiana Man" by RHIANNON GIDDENS)*

For more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "You Louisiana Man," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. 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.