

Song Exploder
Lizzy McAlpine - Staying
Episode 273

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.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

Lizzy McAlpine released her first album in 2020, and her second album in 2022. And between the two, she's had a lot of success. One of her songs, "Ceilings" was a viral TikTok hit that's been streamed over half a billion times. So you might think with all that success, you'd want to keep working in a way that's been working. But while Lizzy was making her third album, *Older*, after almost a year into the process of recording, she threw the whole thing out. She brought in a new band and started over with a totally different approach. I talked to her about the song "Staying" from her new album. Coming up, you'll hear her original voice memos, as well as the first version she made in the studio, and then how it really came to life once she reimagined it.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "What happens when you love me dry? / I give myself to help you get by / I keep on lying, and sweating at night / Hold me until someone sends me a sign")

Lizzy: My name is Lizzy McAlpine.

It was nighttime when I wrote "Staying." I was sitting in my room, in my apartment.

I was thinking about this relationship that I had in college. It lasted for a month and a half, and then for the next four-ish years we were just on-and-off.

At this point, it was over. But I was still, like, processing and reflecting.

I mean, this whole album is about one relationship. And every song is a huge part of that story. But "Staying" was... was a big one.

I had been listening to a lot of The Japanese House. I was listening to the one song off of their new album, "One for sorrow, two for Joni Jones."

I was just so inspired by that song, because it felt like it was just a run-on sentence. There was no "verse, chorus, bridge, chorus." Like, it was so free, and just felt like we were just hearing a diary entry.

Like, sometimes I'll hear a song and immediately have to pause the song and go to my guitar and write. And that's what happened with this.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - voice memo)

(guitar)

I have voice memos of me just playing the chords and, like, trying to figure out the words. And I didn't really wanna think about it too much.

I just let the words come out of me.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - voice memo)

(add vocals)

(Voice memo lyrics: "Laying in bed with you / ...falling asleep / How can you look so peaceful, when I just... / When you know I'm gonna leave")

This relationship in particular was definitely different from every other one that I've ever had, just because we started dating right after I had just, like, gotten my heart broken for the first time. So I was just searching for anything to grab onto, and then he appeared, and I was like, okay, cool.

And then, after a month and a half, he broke up with me. And I was devastated. He broke up with me because he told me that I was too sad.

Hrishikesh: Classic.

Lizzy: I know! That's kind of a wild thing to say to someone. Um, and then I took that with me. And then every time after that that we would come back together, I think that always lived inside of me.

But, for the next four years, I kept going back. And whenever we would come back together, I think that he always wanted it to continue and be more, and I never did.

I would come back, because I knew he would be there. And then I would leave, and the cycle would repeat over and over again. Eventually I could say to myself, like, I know I'm only going back because it's comfortable and I know he'll be there.

But every time, he would, he would go along with it. And every time I'd be like, how are you just okay with this? And how am I okay with doing this to you?

I don't really feel like I hear that perspective a lot, but that was my experience. So that was what I was gonna write about.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - voice memo)

(Voice memo lyrics: "What happens when you love me dry? / I give myself to help you get by / I keep on lying, and sweating at night / Hold me until someone sends me a sign")

There was like this outro bridge section.

(Voice memo lyrics: "Maybe I would be okay / If I let this go forever / Send it into space and watch the planets turn / Maybe I will someday / Let this go forever / Hold me until I find the nerve")

But around this time, I was working with the first producer that I worked with, and we worked for like nine months. This was, like, towards the end of our time working together.

And he was like, we don't really need this end section. And so, we cut that out.

But we did, like, record the song. Or we tried to.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - early version)

(organ)

Initially we recorded the guitar chords on, like, an organ.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - early version)

(add vocals)

(Early version lyrics: "Whisper to me, baby / I'm too far gone to care / I wish I could have said what I meant when it was right there")

And it was initially supposed to be like a really short interlude. And there was gonna be, like, a long organ outro.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE - early version)

*(*humming over organ*...)*

Yeah. It was fine. I mean, I remember thinking like, this is okay, but it's kind of boring.

(humming over organ fades out)

We were kind of just doing it how I've always made an album, which is like, piece by piece, bringing in musicians here and there, every other day. And like, it worked for me, for my first two albums. But I also listen back to those albums now, and I hear how *perfected* they were. And it just felt sterile. I mean...it didn't feel human enough.

Something about this third album didn't feel like it fit that way of doing things. These songs were so real. Like, I wasn't hiding behind, like, a metaphor or like you had to, like, decipher what the real meaning of the song is.

It just felt like the vibes of the songs and the lyrics weren't really matching up to the production. I just kind of felt like, deep down, it was not working. And I was going to make a change, and I was going to find the people that it would work with.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(*piano*)

So I took like a month, and went in search of new collaborators. And I was feeling really disheartened, because I wasn't sure if anyone would ever understand the sound that I was trying to go for.

(*piano ends*)

Then I went to the Ryan Beatty show. I literally just went as a fan. And his band was just, like, *fantastic*. And I was like, I need this. Like, I need these people, in particular.

Hrishikesh: The different people who were backing up Ryan Beatty?

Lizzy: They're their own entity, you know? I mean, I did find them through Ryan, but they're just a band.

So, I got connected to Mason, who's like the leader of the group. And he was like, so down. And everyone else was down.

So I played them the original version, and I was like, I know that I wanna change this. I just don't know, like, *how*.

(*humming from early version*)

So, I left the door open for them to experiment. And we just re-recorded, like, at the pedal steel player's house. It was just one tiny little room, and a control room.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "Whisper to me, baby / I'm too far gone to care / I wish I could have said what I meant when it was right there")

I recorded with the original producer in, like, real studios. And I never really loved that vibe.

I like an intimate, like, home studio. We could all be in one room playing together and figuring things out, and it just felt better.

Taylor Mackall's playing piano. And we didn't record anything to click. So, we didn't have a metronome or anything. Because I wanted to *feel* the music.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "Now I'm laying in bed with you / And you're falling asleep / How can you look so peaceful / When you know I'm gonna leave?")

Those vocals were very important to me. They needed to feel intimate enough.

So, when I recorded the vocals, I really put myself into the headspace of where I was, in the moment that I was thinking about when I was writing the lyrics. And that feels like the only way to do it, is to put myself back into that headspace.

And it's hard, but it really helps the vocals shine, which is worth it to me.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "What happens when you love me dry? / I give myself to help you get by")

So, when we got to the end of the song, there was just a consensus of adding the full band.

It kind of just happened organically.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(add drums)

Sam KS plays drums.

Tyler Nuffer plays Pedal Steel.

(add pedal steel)

Ryan Richter plays guitar.

(add guitar)

Libro played bass.

(add bass)

Mason also played acoustic guitar on this.

(add acoustic guitar)

So they were all jamming. And I was like, guys, I'm gonna add the outro section back in. That the old producer had said I should cut.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "Maybe I would be okay / If I let this go forever / Send it into space and watch the planets turn")

I think when the band enters, we're just cruising.

It's a little more hopeful and less, like, depressing than the beginning of the song.

It was just so easy to imagine those lyrics over top of it, and I didn't want the song to end.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "Maybe I will someday / Let this go forever")

We did add a bunch of mellotron and keys with Taylor. And there's one specifically, after the line, "Send it into space and watch the planets turn," where Taylor does this like, "do, do, do, do, do."

It pans from right to left. It's like a circle, almost. Like a planet spinning, you know [chuckles].

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(Vocals: "Hold me until I find the nerve")

The bridge section was really just about someday, if I decided that I was strong enough to let this relationship go and be by myself, maybe like I actually would be okay. And I know that I'm strong enough, and I know that I could do it, but I'm not ready yet.

It just felt, like, important to add back in. Because it was me saying to myself, like, you *will* be okay if you do this, which I have done already; in this present moment, I have done it, and I am okay.

This song, so much, encapsulates the relationship. I mean, all these songs are about this relationship. But this one felt like I hit the heart of it. We just had a weird connection that just, like, kept bringing us back together.

I have not had that with anyone else. And I don't wanna have that with anyone else, because it was horrible for both of us. And I learned a lot from it. I feel like a completely different person than I was when I started writing this album three years ago.

I have now reached a point where I have grown and changed and learned so much. I have forgiven him, and he's forgiven me, and everything is okay. And I actually had lunch with him right before this. So [chuckles] he's listened to the whole album. He thinks it's great [chuckles].

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

(instruments and backing vocals)

Ever since we recorded it with the band and it got the new vibe, it has been one of my favorites. It just feels like I took back this song and made it my own again. It feels really cathartic.

(instruments fade out)

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

And now, here's "Staying" by Lizzy McAlpine, in its entirety.

("Staying" by LIZZY MCALPINE)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Staying."

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.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about all our shows at radiotopia.fm.

If you'd like to hear more from me, you can sign up for my newsletter, which you can find on the Song Exploder website, songexploder.net. You can also follow me and Song Exploder on instagram, and you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.