

**Song Exploder**  
**Fenne Lily - Lights Light Up**  
**Episode 275**

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.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY)*

Fenne Lily is a singer and songwriter from Dorset, England. She released her first album in 2018, but I didn't find her music until 2023, when she put out her third album, *Big Picture*. The album that she released in between those two was one that got a little lost in the lockdown, when all her touring plans around it got canceled. And all of that plays into the story that she tells in this episode, about making her song "Lights Light Up." I spoke to Fenne in front of a live audience at WBUR CitySpace in Boston. Coming up, you'll hear how "Lights Light Up" evolved across different versions of demos and then, later, in the studio, with Grammy-nominated producer Brad Cook.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY)*

*(Vocals: "And you said, "So, do you ever wanna leave here?" / And I said, "Well, that depends on the day" / And you said, "Oh, do you even wanna be here?" / And I said, "Well, that depends on the way, yeah")*

*(music fades out)*

Fenne: My name's Fenne Lily.

I released a 2020 record called *Breach*. And I was meant to go on a Waxahatchee tour, and another tour with Lucy Dacus, and then Covid hit, and I found myself at home for a year and didn't write a single thing in that year.

I was in Bristol with my boyfriend at the time, in a one bedroom house.

And one of the rooms, that was meant to be the bedroom, was just crumbling wall made of what looked like cheese and what smelled like mold. [crowd laughter] So it was really cool, and fun, and healthy. [crowd laughter]

And that was the headspace I was in.

I wasn't listening to any music because I was so sad that I couldn't tour my record that had taken three years to make. So I was in a hole of just listening to crime, kidnapping, murder stuff — this hole of only absorbing content that was so much about pain that I hit a wall and was like, what's the nicest thing I can think of? And [chuckles] calligraphy was what I decided was the most innocent, uplifting thing. My Nana has really beautiful handwriting. I was like, I wanna learn how to improve my handwriting.

So I bought a journal, and I started writing prose. I had never done that before.

Hrishikesh: Would you mind reading out loud the first thing that you wrote in that journal?

Fenne: Well, first I wrote my contact details in case it got lost. [crowd laughter] I didn't leave the house, so it, it never got lost. [crowd laughter]

Alright, February 13th, 2021. It says "Before I started learning French, I memorized one phrase: I love you, but I can't. This is true. *Je t'aime, mais je ne peux pas.*" It felt good to say."

I just was doing kind of stream of consciousness. And fully intending for it to just be a practice space for conversing with myself.

So I think buying this journal, and not having to worry about whether I could write another album, whether my life was gonna be different to how I imagined it, was really helpful.

And I think it just unlocked something.

I started writing "Lights Light Up" the next week.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY - first demo, instrumental)*

That first demo is from the first day of me figuring it out.

Me and my boyfriend had had a big fight and he'd left and went and stayed with a friend. And I really thought that that was gonna be the fight that ended the relationship.

So I thought, if this is gonna be the end, I'd like to try and map out the start. Because when something bad happens, the temptation is to dissolve the good parts, because it makes you too sad to think about the good parts when you're sad.

So I thought, I'm gonna start this song with me, alone, as I was before I met him. And then the next verse will be me meeting him. And then the third verse will be us together.

*(Vocals: "The traffic lights light up as we stand kissing / And the car horns play along")*

I'm talking about "the traffic lights light up as we stand kissing." We had our first kiss at a traffic lights.

I had had a long string of small, painful flings. And I was apparently failing to do something that I really wanted to do, which was be in love with somebody in a real way.

And then this brilliant person shows up.

*(Vocals: "And you said, "Well, do you ever wanna leave here?" / And I said, "Well, that depends on the day." / And you said, "Oh, I haven't figured out this line yet." / And I said, "Well, that depends on the way.")*

All I had to do was say what I actually was feeling, which was the most difficult part because I'm scared of what I'm feeling, which is: maybe this has reached an end point that we both need, but neither of us want.

So I wrote those three verses, and that chorus. And forgot about it, I think, for six months, until the next big, big fight with my boyfriend.

The writing process is very much punctuated by desperation, fear and loneliness. I think those are the three ingredients for a good song. [crowd laughter]

Yeah, we had a big fight, and I thought, now I have the end of my story.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY - next demo version)*

I wrote the end of the song as if the relationship had ended.

*(Vocals: "You didn't listen when I told you I'm no dancer / Now I dance alone all the time")*

But also, between February, March and when I picked it up again, someone in my family was diagnosed with cancer. And I took it so badly. Worse than I should have, considering it wasn't me that was sick.

I made it all about me. I was really scared, because I'd never had somebody that I loved close to being lost in a real way.

*(Vocals: "In the same room where I learned about the cancer / And you just held your head to mine")*

It honestly just has a fleeting mention, and that felt like enough.

Each verse of this song has four lines. Trying to fit two years of experiences into a very limited number of words is actually really liberating and easy, 'cause you can't waffle. You just have to hopefully do a big feeling justice with a few small words.

*(music fades out)*

And then COVID was partially lifted in the UK. So we went out and did a few shows in December.

And "Lights Light Up," I would play it in soundcheck.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY - next demo version)*

At this point, I broke up with the person that the song is about.

So this recording is the first and only recording from the immediate aftermath of the breakup.

Joe, plays guitar with me, my bassist, Kane, and drummer, James, they have such clear identities as musicians.

And I wanted to take this song from a place of sadness and helplessness, to a place that sounded uplifting, as much as my dulcet tones can allow.

*(Vocals: "The traffic lights light up as we stand kissing / And the car horns play along")*

And through that, we kind of pieced together different ideas that worked.

*(Vocals: "Nice! Nailed it. Nailed it, nailed it. That's right in the pocket, that one.")*

It finally has momentum. And I think for songs that are being written about being stuck, that is a helpful thing to have. And it's also so much more fun to play faster. (laughs)

So I had the arrangements. And then we flew to North Carolina to record the record.

I knew that I wanted to work with Brad Cook. That Waxahatchee record, *St. Cloud*, he produced that. That's a very poetic record, and it's perfectly executed.

And I needed somebody who could give us the space and permission to take the songs in directions that we hadn't thought to take them before. And that's exactly what he did.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY - guitar)*

I think Joe's guitar part has become the main character in this song.

I say really annoying things when I'm giving direction in my band.

I'll say something like "Play a guitar part that sounds like you were looking for something and now you found it!" [crowd laughter] And he was like, "Say no more, please say no more."

He knows when to not play, which is as important as knowing when to play. Leaving space, letting there be room.

My instruction was to keep everything moving, 'cause I felt like the vocal part is very static. I wanted everything else to be swirling and moving.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY - swirling instruments fade down)*

*(guitar and drums)*

That, like, close mic way of recording drums really helps to feel like there's something happening all the time, but none of it's too much.

So, the bass has the job of gluing everything together in a melodic way.

*(Vocals: "I guess we never really had that much in common / 'Cept the days, the nights, and the cold / And though we don't really talk about it often / The fear of this getting old")*

When I went to record the lyrics, it's the first time that I'd really saw it as a story that wasn't something that was being figured out anymore.

It wasn't like a puzzle to play with. It was like an exact description of this entire relationship that had now ended and we were on different paths.

*(Vocals: "And you said "So, do you ever wanna leave here?" / And I said "Well, that depends on the day.")*

And yeah, I started crying. And I'm not a crier, ever, really. I'm very uncomfortable with other people crying, so I try not to do it myself. Yeah. I cried.

*(Vocals isolated: "And you said "Oh, do you even wanna be here?" / And I said "Well, that depends on the way")*

*(bass chords)*

That's Kane playing bass chords.

We put those bass chords in and thought, "We'll never use them." And then, when we got to mixing, there was a space that needed filling, and that was it.

*(piano)*

Phil Cook is an incredible pianist. He's also Brad's brother.

I did six years of piano lessons — can't play piano. Brad was watching me frustratedly try and put piano on a lot of the songs and gently suggested maybe we get Phil.

So yeah, got Phil over to be better at piano than me.

I think the first band demo, where we were figuring out the parts, I was just excited that it had come together in a cool way. So after I finished singing the first chorus, I just went, "yeah."

*(Vocals: "...yeah")*

And then I thought, that's actually kind of cool.

Maybe it's a British thing, but saying something sincere that you mean and you feel has to kind of be followed by, like, a word that undoes some of the sincerity. 'Cause it's so embarrassing to be so serious.

So to have a song that's about love growing and falling apart and someone maybe dying of cancer and then to be like, "Yep, well that was that, so." [crowd laughter]

That has to happen. [chuckles]

And I recreated the spontaneity, which is always a very smooth and cool move.

*(Vocals: "And I said "Well, that depends on the way, yeah")*

The really exciting thing about making music, aside from people hearing it, is if you ever wanna hear where your head was at, at a certain point in time, you can. It's all stored there. This is like a time capsule. Pre-falling in real love for the first time, all the way to the dissolution of that love. It feels like a time that was really important and precious. Recording in North Carolina, that was the happiest I'd been, up until that point.

*(instrumental scoring)*

I was living in the studio. So I just felt really at peace and I trusted everyone I was working with. And after a year and a half of living in the same room with a person who, at the same time as they're holding me together, they're also tearing me apart...To be in that environment with Brad and the guys was so amazing.

I think part of the reason why I cried was 'cause I was like, I did it. I found what I wanted, which was to feel light and free and be with people again.

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 "Lights Light Up" by Fenne Lily, in its entirety.

*("Lights Light Up" by FENNE LILY)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "Lights Light Up," 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. Thanks so much to Steven Davy, and everyone at WBUR CitySpace.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.