

Song Exploder
Gracie Abrams - I Love You, I'm Sorry
Episode 283

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

Gracie Abrams is a singer and songwriter from Los Angeles. She started putting out music in 2020, and in June 2024, she put out her second album, *The Secret of Us*. She was nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist, and this year she's up for another Grammy, for Best Duo Performance, for her collaboration with Taylor Swift. But for this episode, I talked to Gracie about her song "I Love You, I'm Sorry." It was produced by Aaron Dessner, at Long Pond Studio in upstate New York, and it was co-written with Audrey Hobert.

Coming up, you'll hear the isolated tracks from the studio recording, but you'll also get to hear a lot of the voice memos that Gracie recorded during the writing process. I think it's so nice to have these raw moments documented because, as you'll hear, they give you an insight not just into the song, but into the relationship that Gracie and her co-writer, Audrey, have as friends.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS)

(Vocals: "That's just the way life goes / I like to slam doors closed / Trust me, I know it's always about me / I love you, I'm sorry")

Hrishikesh: Okay, I'm recording on my side.

Gracie: We're recording as well.

Hrishikesh: Great. Ready?

Gracie: I'm a very open book, so I'm ready to get into all of it.

Hrishikesh: Let's start at the beginning. Do you happen to remember the exact moment when the idea for the song first came to you?

Gracie: Oh yeah. I had just made a plan to hang and talk with my ex-boyfriend, who I used to write lots of songs about.

Hrishikesh: And, at this point, was he already your ex?

Gracie: Yeah. It had been, like, two years. Like, having never run into each other, you know, no real communication.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Gracie: I had just felt so much, not even residual love, but just like real love for somebody who was so significant in my life and such a formative partner. And I think having had a couple years of space, there was more room than ever for not only, like, reflecting on all that was, but also just kind of fantasizing about a world in which everything's cool between us.

Hrishikesh: Was there something that prompted this conversation that you were gonna have with your, your ex? Was there an event or something? How did it end up being that you were gonna reconnect?

Gracie: We were both gonna be home around the holidays, and it wasn't some dramatic thing, but it was very significant for me to reconnect at all.

Audrey Hobert, who's my roommate and dear friend and a co-writer on "I Love You, I'm Sorry," and on a handful of other songs on the album, she and I were sitting outside in our, like, tiny courtyard situation. And I just had the first line of the song come into my head immediately, and it was one of those moments where we're like, in the middle of a conversation, and I told Audrey, "hold on," (chuckles) ran inside, grabbed the guitar, and it, that was the start of it.

(Voice memo vocals: "Two Augusts ago... (mumble humming) Two Augusts ago...")

I just had "two Augusts ago" in my head immediately, with the chords. There was something very nostalgic about those chords. And it was around Christmas time, because we had our Christmas tree in the house, and I remember it feeling very, like, holiday spirit charged through the house, which helped when kind of, being all, like, sappy.

(Voice memo fades out)

That was all I had in my head initially, and I think... I think there's a huge chance if I had started that by myself, I wouldn't have actually ended up believing in it much. But with Audrey and I, it's like, I remember after starting it, writing the first bit, she was so like, "fuck yes." Like, "let's chase it." She really brought the energy (laughs) when I was more so just, like, nostalgic and a little blue.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. I find that, a lot of times, I will throw an idea away immediately after writing it, but if I write with somebody else, and if they sing it back –

Gracie: Yes.

Hrishikesh: – then suddenly I'm like, “Oh, well it's nice when *you* sing it.”

Gracie: And I don't know, what is it, a self-esteem thing? I don't know. I think there's, there is something that will never not feel slightly embarrassing or like cringe about putting my feelings to song.

Like who do I think I am, even?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Gracie: But having somebody else in the room to back you... Yeah, it makes a huge difference.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, and especially when it's someone who can say, "I think that's a good line", and “What about this for the next line?”

Gracie: Totally.

(Voice memo)

“Audrey: Find someone to date...”

Gracie: I just think, and I'll be... something, find someone to date... and that's just the way life goes.

Audrey: I'll be a hoe, find someone to date.

Gracie: Yeah.

*Audrey: *laughs**

*Gracie: Yeah. *hums* I'll make it known? Find someone to date?*

Audrey: Ooh! Wait... Write that down.”

Hrishikesh: Who's saying “Ooh!” there?

Gracie: Audrey. I said, “I'll make it known.” And she goes, “Ooh!” That's what I mean. It's like the nod of like, “That's kind of funny! That's kind of a thing.”

It's so funny to listen back. Like, in my head there was never an alternative lyric to any of these. I'm like, everything felt like it just came out.

But then, listening back, I'm like, ew, “Find someone to date” is terrible.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Gracie: Thank God we didn't keep that. Uh, yeah. Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me more about your relationship with Audrey? How did you end up writing songs together?

Gracie: We met when we were 10 years old and then went to middle school together, and we were on the same bus to school. And so we'd sit with each other, and music was always kind of the core of our relationship. Like, her mom is, like, she has just like the coolest voice to me. And I remember, like, growing up, always hearing her sing and being so impressed that she could, like, harmonize just like immediately. And Audrey kind of taught me how to do that when we were really little. And I taught her how to, like, hold a melody when someone's, like, harmonizing. And we'd sit on the bus and just do that.

And as we grew up, we never, ever even talked about writing music together. But when we moved in together, two years ago, it just started happening one day because we kind of like riff off of each other so much.

But what she brings out in me is a kind of self-assuredness and confidence. It was a side of my personality that I have struggled to infuse into my music. And I was really grateful to her for that, specifically.

Hrishikesh: And how different is your songwriting conversation from your regular conversation?

Gracie: It's not all that different. I think what's really cool about writing with somebody that you do know so well: No one's feelings are getting hurt. So, it's very blunt, and very fast, as a result.

We're oftentimes going with the line that makes us laugh the hardest. And that's what kept it feeling so conversational the whole time, is we were really just like, making each other laugh in the face of big, uncomfortable, new adult feelings.

But I think it was funny, like even, you know, for this, when I was listening back to our voice memos, there are so many moments where we will say the same thing at the same time. That doesn't mean we always land on that, or keep it, but I, yeah. I think something happens cognitively with the two of us where we are on the same page often.

(Voice memo)

“Gracie: But it's okay..

Audrey: Yeah, but it's okay, for sure.

Gracie: Like, and you won't be here, but that's okay? Like, or like, and...

Audrey: ...I might.... I, like, I might not feel real, like, like, maybe? Like...

Gracie: Yeah....

Audrey: Yeah...

Gracie: I- I love that. Um, I literally love "I might not feel real...

Audrey: But it's okay.

Gracie: But it's okay.

Audrey: Yeah.

Gracie: Sick."

Hrishikesh: One of the things I love in one of the voice memos you sent me, there's a little exchange between you and Audrey—

Gracie: Oh...

Hrishikesh: —that's like:

(Voice memo)

*"Gracie: *humming* Watch the sunset on the lake.*

Audrey: On the lake, yeah.

Gracie: That's sick.

Audrey: That's great.

Gracie: And it's real.

Audrey: Yeah."

Gracie: "And it's real." (chuckles) So funny.

Hrishikesh: So, can you tell me about that? What was the "real" part of that?

Gracie: The real part was my, uh, family, my family is from Maine and my grandparents live on a lake in Maine that I have grown up-- it's just like, a very significant place in my life. And anybody who knows me, knows that that is where I run away to and where I think about everything too, too hard.

(Voice memo)

"Gracie: And I'll have a drink / Wistfully lean out my window and watch the sun set on the lake.

*Audrey: *laughs**

Gracie: And na-na-na-na..."

Hrishikesh: Can I ask you more about the sense of humor between you two?

Gracie: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Because it's so much easier to laugh with a friend. But it's hard to laugh just by yourself, and especially, if you're trying to write a song that is emotionally true. It might be hard to squeeze jokes into it, or, you know, things that are funny. Is this the sort of thing that could only emerge in that context, with Audrey?

Gracie: The thing, one of the things that's so magical about Audrey is like, I think she is somebody that, like, in the greatest way, talks to herself a lot, makes herself laugh a lot. So I think, like, I bring less of that to the table when I'm by myself. But I think it's one of the things that I've always valued about our friendship is that, in the face of tough feelings, we're never not laughing somewhere.

Hrishikesh: I'd love to ask you about the bridge for this song, because it feels so different from the, from the verse and the chorus.

Gracie: I think a lot-- most of the bridges on this album are like the kind of manic thought perspective, kind of like just going off, like rattling quite quickly. And I, I definitely wanted, like, rhythmically, a change to happen.

(Voice memo)

"Gracie: I was a dick, it is what it is... a habit... I was a dick, it is what it is, a habit to kick... uh..

Audrey: A something curse?

*Gracie: A habit to kick, an age-old curse? *humming* ... habit to kick, an age-old curse..."*

Gracie: When I'm writing lyrics and recording a voice memo, it's like so rarely actually in a speaking voice or a singing voice. It's like, really ugly, horrible, like in-between, like, mumbling where I'm not even enunciating.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Gracie: I think it's like a mouth-feel thing, maybe, that I do that. I don't know what the fuck... It's so horrible.

Hrishikesh: What do you, what do you mean, a mouth-feel thing?

Gracie: Just like how a word, like, sort of sits in your mouth? (laughs) It is stupid, but it's, I'm always so embarrassed... I, like...

Hrishikesh: No, no, I like that. I think you're right. I, I see what you're saying.

Gracie: You are ver- you're being very generous that you're saying you know what I mean.

Hrishikesh: No, I, I think, because you don't just have to consider what the word means, and how it relates to –

Gracie: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: – whatever the lyric is before, but you have to think about the actual... (laughs) I think mouth-feel is the right word.

Gracie: Right?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

So there's another voice memo that I have from you that is basically a demo of the whole song, and it's not just you singing, it's you and Audrey both singing?

Gracie: Yes.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS - demo)

(Vocals: "I tend to laugh whenever I'm sad / I stare at the crash, it actually works / Making amends, this shit never ends / I'm wrong again, (wrong again) / It's just the way life goes / Joyriding down...")

Hrishikesh: Okay, so that moment where, at the end of the bridge, she goes up to "wrong again." How much thought and conversation had gone into that? Or was that just something that she just did...

Gracie: Pure riff. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Really?

Gracie: Yeah. Literally, yeah. This was the first time that I was writing with a friend who has a fucking amazing voice, whose personality is more extroverted than mine is when I'm alone, who, like, when we are recording, will go off like she did in this voice memo. And that, you know, inspires me. And I had not been somebody that, like, even considered being more extroverted with my vocals.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS)

(Vocals: "I'm wrong again (wrong again) / The way life goes / Joyriding down our road / Lay on the horn to prove that it haunts me / I love you, I'm sorry / The way life goes / I wanna speak in code / Hope that I don't, won't...")

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Gracie Abrams continues after this.

—

So, after you finished writing the song, how did you end up working with Aaron Dessner as the producer?

Gracie: I had been a fan of The National since I was like 11 years old. Like, as soon as I got an iPod, I was listening to The National all the time. And I think it was like kind of that preteen and then like teen angst, you know, where their “sad dad” thing, like, that, to me...

Hrishikesh: As a 12-year-old girl...

Gracie: For some reason as a 12-year-old girl, yeah, like, really hit. (laughs) So I was a huge fan for years and years and years.

(“I Love You, I’m Sorry” by GRACIE ABRAMS - acoustic guitar)

Hrishikesh: Who’s playing this guitar part?

Gracie: Aaron is.

Hrishikesh: I’m curious why that is. Because you played the guitar in the demo, so –

Gracie: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Why did you have him play the guitar part?

Gracie: Uh, he’s a fucking genius at guitar. He is so good. You know, for the sake of time, which we didn’t have much of, I was like, (laughs) you’ll nail this the first time and then we can build the rest of the world.

(“I Love You, I’m Sorry” by GRACIE ABRAMS - acoustic guitar continues)

I knew I wanted it to stay on acoustic guitar. I knew I wanted lap steel.

(add lap steel)

I wanted it to feel full and warm.

(add bass)

(Vocals: “Two Augusts ago / I told the truth, oh, but you didn’t like it, you went home / You’re in your Benz, I’m by the gate”)

Hrishikesh: So, how does the story unfold in this first verse?

Gracie: I came to this person with feelings that were real. It didn’t align with maybe what they wanted or expected. They drove away. I stayed at home. (chuckles)

And then I had this petty line in the song, just... We're not together. You go alone to all these events, to all these dinners, all these things. Like, you're primed for this kind of group of people, this environment. You're wildly charming, it works. But, like, I'm over here judging it, like a dick.

(Vocals: "Now you go alone / Charm all the people you train for, you mean well but aim low")

Hrishikesh: That's a great, vicious line. "You mean well, but aim low." That's brutal.

Gracie: It's fucked up. (chuckles) That's the petty part.

And then immediately, I was just like, okay, it would be nice if we can make this song feel like there are chapters to it, where it's like, we're not just living in one tiny moment, but we're like past, present, future.

(Vocals: "Two summers from now / We'll have been talking, but not all that often, we're cool now / I'll be on a boat, you're on a plane / Going somewhere, same")

"I'll be on a boat, you're on a plane; Going somewhere, same" is one of my favorite parts of the song. I just like the concept of being softer with each other and having our own lives, and they are separate.

(Vocals: "Cause that's just the way life goes / I push my luck, it shows / Thankful you don't send someone to kill me")

I know that I hurt your feelings to an extent where I guarantee like, your best friend doesn't like me very much anymore.

I have been careless in the past about people's experiences on the other side of writing something. And I was not until this past year careful with how it might feel to be on the receiving end of a song being about you.

And having seen the way that it makes people feel, I don't wanna make people feel that way.

Hrishikesh: You have a song from a few years ago called "I Miss You, I'm Sorry." I feel like it can't be a coincidence that this song title follows the same sort of format... So, did you already have the idea that you wanted to fit the words "I love you, I'm sorry" into what you were writing?

Gracie: So, I had written "I Miss You, I'm Sorry" about the same person. Wrote that song years ago. And, um, it kind of felt like the first time I had put a song out where I felt like the response from strangers was not just, "Oh, I like this," but when I

looked at the, you know, comments under the YouTube video, it was, like, paragraphs of people's stories. And that was really important for me.

And then after, for like, years I had written different versions of songs of, like, "I Hate You, I'm Sorry". For some reason something about that song just got in my head as like a, like, this is like a pillar.

(Audrey's Vocals: "...way life goes / I like to slam doors closed / Trust me, I know. It's always about me")

Gracie: That's Audrey.

Hrishikesh: And there's more than one track of her vocals?

Gracie: Yeah.

(Audrey's Vocals: "Two summers from now / We'll have been talking, but not all that often, we're cool now")

When Audrey came to Long Pond, she'd just fucking rip, like *rip* in the vocal booth in a way where like Aaron and I and Bella, who's our brilliant engineer, would like be out in the room, being like, holy shit, that's so fucking awesome.

(Audrey's Vocals: "And I'll have a drink / Wistfully lean out my window and watch the sun set on the lake / I might not feel real, but it's okay")

The thing that I love so much about singing with her is that, like, I think our voices do a thing together, where it's like, it almost feels like one thing versus two things.

(Audrey and Gracie's Vocals: "'Cause that's just the way life goes / I push my luck, it shows / Thankful you don't send someone to kill me / I love you, I'm sorry")

I want synths on everything.

(add synths)

Especially because I think when Aaron and I are together, we can make things that feel very woodsy and very folky and like, that they like, belong to a witch. So I wanted there to be some lift. I wanted it to feel a little bit glittery and, amidst the warmth of the guitar and the slide.

'Cause I feel like, you know, maybe people, when they're listening to the song, you're not necessarily hearing those things, but you feel them.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS - synths)

Hrishikesh: There are also these beautiful strings.

Gracie: Oh yeah.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS - strings)

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about these parts?

Gracie: Rob Moose. Genius.

I think it just brings a level of emotion that, you know, nothing else does.

(Vocals: "Hope that I don't, won't make it about me")

Yeah, I'd like to work with him forever.

(instrumental fades out)

Hrishikesh: You said that it was Christmas time when you wrote this; what year was that?

Gracie: 2023.

Hrishikesh: Okay. So it hasn't been two summers.

Gracie: No.

Hrishikesh: But how do you feel about the song now, looking back at it a year later?

Gracie: It feels kind of like a tiny little prophecy, I think. I remember sending him the song when it was done. I was just like, the sentiment is real. Here you go. I literally love you, and I'm so sorry.

This is me fantasizing. This is me, like, desperately wanting to be in a place someday where it doesn't feel heavy and like knives every time there's an interaction. It doesn't feel, like, too casual or too intense. It just is, like, solid. Easy. And like real friends.

And, if I can be so presumptuous to say, I think it, I think it's working. (laughs) I think it's working.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Love You, I'm Sorry" by Gracie Abrams, in its entirety.

("I Love You, I'm Sorry" by GRACIE ABRAMS)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "I Love You, I'm Sorry" and you can watch the music video, which was directed by Gracie's co-writer, Audrey Hobert..

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Our production assistant is Tiger Biskup. 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.