

Song Exploder
Adrienne Lenker - Sadness As a Gift
Episode 285

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.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER)

(Vocals: "A-one, two, one, two, three, four")

Adrienne Lenker is a singer and songwriter. She's the lead singer of the critically acclaimed and beloved band Big Thief, and her work as a solo artist is also critically acclaimed and beloved. Her most recent solo album, Bright Future, was named one of the best albums of 2024 by the New Yorker, Stereogum, and more, and it was nominated for a Grammy for Best Folk Album. It was co-produced by Adrienne and longtime collaborator Philip Weinrobe. And I talked to the two of them about the making of one of my favorite songs from it, "Sadness As a Gift."

(Vocals: "You and I both know / There is nothing more to say / Chance has shut her shining eyes / And turned her face away / Leaning on the windowsill / You could write me someday, and I think you will / We could see the sadness as a gift and still / Feel too heavy to hold")

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me when "Sadness As a Gift" first started coming to you, how the idea for the song first entered your mind?

Adrienne: Well, I had gone through a breakup, and my heart was aching a lot. I had this therapist for a little while and he was actually the one who first planted the idea in my mind that that sadness you feel is actually just an indication of your love. You wouldn't feel that sadness or that longing without having this great love inside of you.

And that sadness is an indicator of how strongly you feel, and felt. So it kind of flipped my way of thinking about sadness. And, years later, when I was going through this heartbreak, I was feeling that. Like, yes, this is a loss, but therein lies the gift of feeling how powerfully I love. But, it didn't cancel out the fact that it can still feel unbearable.

Hrishikesh: Hm.

Adrienne: So it's holding both worlds. It's like acknowledging the longing and all of that sadness, not trying to push it away.

Hrishikesh: Well, I have this recording that I believe is the original demo that you made.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER - demo)

(Vocals: "Snow fallin' / Try to keep from callin' / Watch the spring turn to winter / Fireflies all frozen / Ah, the seasons go fast / Thinking that this love was gonna last / Maybe the question was too much to ask")

Adrienne: Wow. I had definitely been crying in that one. That was a voice memo right from when I wrote it, so. I can hear in my voice, my voice was pretty raw. And, yeah.

(Vocals: "Searching for your eyes / All I see is blue skies / And that old man beats his crooked cane / It's time to let go")

Searching for your eyes, all I see are blue skies. Like, looking at blue skies is like a very joyful feeling, but it's like, I don't even want to see the blue sky, I just want to see your eyes. That's all I'm looking for, and all I can see is this big blue sky.

And, the old man beats his crooked cane, says it's time to let go, it's like these figures you encounter. Like, maybe they don't even understand their own magic, but they give you these little keys to your existence.

Maybe it's a tree, you know? Maybe the tree is the old man. The crooked cane is just the limb of the tree, and it's beating in the wind. And the leaves are falling off the branch, and it's shaking off the last of its dead leaves, reminding you it's time to let go. Everything, we must let go of everything. And it's a gift to feel that sadness, because it means you're feeling and it means... it means you're alive and that you're able to love.

(Vocals: "Ah, leaning on the windowsill / You could write me someday, and I hope you will / We could see the sadness as a gift and still")

I was deep in the feeling of what I was going through. And I can really hear that in my voice when I hear that recording.

Sometimes when I'm really deep in a feeling, it's too much to write. Like I can't write, in those exact moments and those very things feel so out of reach and feel so hard. Just pick up the notebook or like pick up the guitar, get it out of the case. You know, but it's like, no, I think I'm just gonna eat this bag of chips and faceplant. (laughs) But like, not that there's anything wrong with that.

Like, sometimes that's what you gotta do, you know? But sometimes, I'll like see a flash of myself picking up the guitar. And I'm still laying there, you know.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Adrienne: Okay, well I don't think I'm gonna write anything right now, and I don't feel too good. But like, maybe, I'll just play it for a couple seconds and I can always put it down.

And it's like, pick it up and it's like, oh my God, oh, this is what I needed, you know?

Sometimes nothing happens, but sometimes a whole thing happens.

Hrishikesh: Adrienne, I know you met Phil originally through Big Thief. How did you end up deciding to work with him on your solo albums?

Adrienne: When I first met him I thought he was too good to be true.

Hrishikesh: In what way?

Adrienne: Like, I kind of felt like he was so generous in his presence and with his spirit. And just watching how he lives life and how he does his work, it was always just so engaged and so loving and, I just came to develop a very deep trust for him.

Philip: I'm Philip Weinrobe, and I engineered, mixed, and produced this song alongside Adrienne.

Hrishikesh: Phil, do you remember the first time you heard this song in any kind of form?

Philip: Yeah, Adrienne texted it to me. You know, Adrienne texts me a good amount of songs. And, um, I love all of them equally and some of them more equally.

Adrienne: (chuckles)

Philip: And this was one that I loved more equally, right away from the iPhone recording. It just felt like a song that had existed for, like, thousands of years. And also, like, I've never heard it before, which is such a wonderful experience to have when listening to a song.

And this was probably a good year before we went in to record. So it had been kicking around for a while, and it had almost taken on, like, its own lore, in the small community of people who hear some of Adrienne's songs in their early stages. Like I remember speaking with a few different people in the Big Thief camp and it was like, man, have you heard "Sadness As a Gift?" It's like, "yeah, yeah, I heard it, whoa, I can't stop listening to it". So I kind of thought like, oh, we're going in to make the record that's gonna have "Sadness As a Gift" on it.

Hrishikesh: And, where did you go to record the album?

Adrienne: It took place in a little studio in the northeast called Double Infinity.

Hrishikesh: What made you decide that was where you wanted to do it?

Philip: We wanted to be in a place we could really feel kind of at home in. And had the feeling of, even though we recorded a record there, this place doesn't feel like a recording studio. Just a room you can make music in.

Adrienne: And with like water nearby and forest, and feeling the wind blowing through, kind of. Not really heavily insulated and sound-proofed like a lot of studios are.

I was wanting to feel what it would be like to be responding in real time to other people playing parlor instruments. Just acoustic instruments, piano, guitars, and violin. There's something incredibly exciting to me about the alchemy and the power that can be produced and created with just these raw instruments, together in a room, without the need for headphones.

It feels immense and deep and rich and powerful, but even just in its softness.

Hrishikesh: And who else was there with the two of you?

Adrienne: Josefin Runsteen, Nick Hakim, and Mat Davidson. A really magical part of this whole thing was that, the first people I thought of and the first people I asked were actually all miraculously available. I was like, hmm, who could play piano? Oh, Nick. I would love to play with Nick. And then who could play fiddle or violin? Well, Mat plays fiddle and Josefin, I love how she plays violin and we had never all played together, so there was some risk involved. We didn't really know how it was going to alchemize, but I love all of them.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me more about this idea of not using headphones? 'Cause that feels pretty unusual.

Adrienne: Well, Phil and I first were just the two of us, for like a week, and then everyone showed up. But we didn't use headphones. I was just sitting in the room with my acoustic guitar. And then once everyone else showed up, it just kind of carried over.

And even further than not wearing headphones was, we didn't even listen back to a single thing that we did at all. Like everyone left and hadn't heard a single recording we had made. (laughs) And no one even asked.

Hrishikesh: What do you think is the advantage of not listening back to stuff you're recording?

Because that feels like such a huge part of the recording process normally. You know, okay, let's do a take, let's listen back. How did that sound? Oh, let me adjust this thing and then fix it for the next take. What is the benefit of not working that way?

Philip: Trusting yourself.

Adrienne: Yeah, trusting your feelings. Mm-hmm.

It's almost like, getting ready to go out the door without looking in a mirror. There is an inclination or a strong pull to check yourself all the time to check like, what do we sound like? Does this sound good? Do we need to change or alter anything? Do I, do we need to move this piece of hair, like, to the right of that eyebrow? But I feel like actually working in a way where you just go based off of how it feels to play in the room. And, oh, I know that take two was good because I felt so much when we were playing at that time. And like, I know that the take after that was good, cause I got chills during that one. And I cried on take four. So, man, like, I know we got it in there. We got it in there somewhere. I don't even have to hear back. Cause I know I enjoyed that moment of playing music in the room. And I gotta trust that that's as real a gauge as any gauge could be.

Philip: The problem with playback is that you must be a critic during playback. You must analyze. You can't really just listen to playback and enjoy it. And as soon as you flip roles and become an analyzer and a critic, you've now lost whatever performer position you're in. And to me, that's the real tragedy of playback is that we do all this work to like get into a zone to perform.

And then playback just kind of like knocks you off that very, very tender and beautiful little balancing position that you've gotten in. And in a group, it's even more difficult and so I just want to protect the ability to perform music at all costs. And, to me, playback is dangerous because of that.

Adrienne: Mm.

Hrishikesh: So I wanted to ask you that, just to preface what we're going to be listening to. Because no headphones means everyone's just in one room playing and listening to each other in real time, so everybody's playing is in everyone's mic. Normally on this show, I can isolate the different instruments, but that's not possible with this live recording set-up that you did.

Adrienne: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: But, one cool thing that I *do* have is all the different takes that you all recorded.

Adrienne: Cool, I didn't know you had this stuff. That's awesome.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Phil sent me all eight different takes of the song, recorded on, on two different days.

Adrienne: Wow!

Hrishikesh: So, let's listen to this part from the very first take.

Adrienne: Cool.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER - Take 1)

(Vocals: "The seasons go so fast / Thinking that this one was gonna last / Maybe the question was too much to ask")

Adrienne: It's cool hearing the double fiddle.

Hrishikesh: I noticed that the lyrics are a little bit different here. In the demo, you had sung "The seasons go fast / Thinking that this love was gonna last." And now you've changed it to "The seasons go so fast / Thinking that this one was gonna last." I know it's a little change, but I was wondering if you could tell me about making that change.

Adrienne: I thought it was stronger. 'Cause "The seasons go fast / Thinking this love was gonna last" kind of puts the season and the love in, like, different categories, whereas it's really, like, "thinking that this *season* was gonna last", which *is* the love, so it's kind of redundant.

Hrishikesh: I, I love that double meaning in the song. Phil, do you remember what you were thinking when you heard this for the first time, with the full ensemble?

Philip: So, the first run on "Sadness As a Gift" was before Nick Hakim arrived to the studio. So, this is Adrienne, Mat Davidson, and Josefin Runsteen.

Hrishikesh: Right, and so that's why we didn't hear piano in that take.

Philip: Yeah. Actually, I remember thinking that I was excited. But as it was happening, I could hear the energy from the violins came in late or was a little hesitant and remember feeling in this first take like, "Oh, they're gonna, they're gonna get a little warmed up after this one and, and we're going to start really digging in, I bet".

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER - Take 7)

Hrishikesh: I mean, it's already so different.

Adrienne: Yeah. That's, that is the energy. You can feel it. It's like, the other one, it's like, you're kind of skirting around the edges of the song. And this one is like, you're in the song.

(Vocals: "You and I both know / There is nothing more to say / Chance has shut her shining eyes, and turned her face away / Leanin' on the windowsill / You could write me someday, and I think you will / We could see the sadness as a gift and still / Feel too heavy to hold")

Adrienne: There must have been something like unsettled or not fully satisfied in me that was like, I don't know if we have it yet. Even though the energy is really there. But there must have been something in the delivery that didn't fully convey the story, because I don't know why else we would have done it again.

Philip: I think it was like, let's give it a shot before Nick comes, we did a bunch of takes, see how it goes, and then let's, like, do it again after Nick gets here. But, we were always going to try it again once Nick showed up.

Hrishikesh: And, you'll hear how that turned out when my conversation with Adrienne Lenker and Philip Weinrobe continues after this.

So, I'd love to listen to the take that actually made it onto the album. And, um, in this one, Nick Hakim is now playing piano, and Mat Davidson has moved from fiddle to electric guitar.

Adrienne: Yeah.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER - Take 10)

(Vocals: "A-one, two, one, two, three, four")

Philip: That is a hundred percent not planned, just to be clear. Like, Adrienne just like heard Mat playing and started playing. We didn't say, "why doesn't this start with an electric guitar rundown?"

Adrienne: Mm-hmm. Yeah, no, we didn't. (laughs)

Philip: And in fact, you can tell it's unplanned *because* Adrienne's counting. I think you're kind of saying, "actually, let's just do a take". That's what that means.

Adrienne: Mm.

Hrishikesh: Right. 'Cause you don't do that count-in on other takes.

(Vocals: "A-one, two, one, two, three, four")

Adrienne, did you ever think about doing everything live except the vocals? Keeping this kind of parlor feel, but then coming back and being like, "well, and now, and then I'll overdub my vocals on top of this performance, so that I can do as many takes, or change my mind about things later"?

Adrienne: I just don't love doing it like that, because I feel like I have the most fun singing when I'm singing with everything that's happening in real time.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Adrienne: It does feel risky sometimes because I'm like, well, what if I don't like that? But then it also helps me let go because if I'm having fun, it's probably a good vocal take, even if it's not perfect. And I could get a perfect vocal take, but it won't have all that energy of when I was having fun with everyone. Which one would you rather hear; someone singing who's having fun, or someone singing who's thinking about getting a perfect vocal take?

When I was a kid, I recorded a lot. You know, I didn't go to high school. Instead I was just in the studio and I would sit at 13 years old in the studio for hours and hours and hours comping together, line by line, word by word.

Hrishikesh: For your vocal takes?

Adrienne: Yeah. That's what I was told was the way to make something good. That you have to get it perfect. And I didn't really like how the records came out.

It sucked the joy out of it for me. And when I listen to recordings I love, there's a spark of life and energy in it that like, I started practicing and studying, in a way, how to find that. I do really love the way it feels to play music in a room and let all of the things in.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER)

(Vocals: "You and I could see into the same eternity")

I really like singing that part.

Hrishikesh: That lyric?

Adrienne: Yeah. Because it, it's another question, like, what does it look like to see into eternity? And the same eternity as someone else, implying that there are different eternities that individuals could see into, and that somehow you and I have lined up, and we're looking, like, into this little, like, window of the same, same eternity.

And you could hear the music inside my mind, and you showed me a place I'll find even when I'm old.

(Vocals: "Oh, kiss so sweet so fine / You could hear the music inside my mind / And you showed me a place I'll find / Even when I'm old")

It's like maybe when we all line up on a song and we're singing it together or feeling it together, with all of our different ways of perceiving and all of our different life stories and journeys, when we all sing a song together in a present moment, we're actually glimpsing eternity together.

(Vocals: "Maybe the question was too much to ask")

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sadness As a Gift" by Adrienne Lenker, in its entirety.

("Sadness As a Gift" by ADRIANNE LENKER)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Sadness As a Gift" and you can watch the music video.

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.