

Song Exploder
Lizzo - Still Bad
Episode 291

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.

Lizzo is a Grammy-and Emmy-winning singer, rapper, songwriter, and actress. She's been putting out music since 2013, and her last two albums both went platinum. Her 5th album, *Love In Real Life*, comes out this summer. For this episode, I talked to Lizzo, as well as her long-time collaborator, Grammy-winning producer Ricky Reed, about the making of one of her new songs, "Still Bad." It wasn't a straightforward process at all, and coming up, you'll hear just a few of the many, many demos they made on their way to the final song.

("STILL BAD" by LIZZO)

(Vocals: "He knocked me down / Thought I'd never get my fine ass off the ground, oh-oh / But I'm ready now / Feelin' crazy lately, baby, let's go out")

Lizzo: I'm Melissa, "Lizzo," in quotes, Viviane Jefferson. Professionally known as Lizzo. (laughs) I don't know why I'm so giggly.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Lizzo: Professionally known as Lizzo.

I had started working on this entire album, maybe October 2023. And I had written a lot of songs that the world will never hear because it was, like, house music, or like, a lot of rap, and a lot of, like, dark songs. And I was like, I'm not here to write songs that's, like, dark and depressed, And, you know, I write the silver lining records. I write songs that make people feel good.

Hrishikesh: What were the other songs like? What were they about?

Lizzo: Oh my God. The cycle of, like, tearing people down and building them up and tearing 'em down again and watching them get back up. It's, like, fun to see.

Hrishikesh: Where you're the person being torn down?

Lizzo: Absolutely. But it's like, woe is me. Like, what, I'm not gonna put that on my album. Like, write the song, you know, get it off your chest. But the world don't

need to hear those songs. My, like, thesis question or whatever, statement, every time I'm in the studio is like, what song does the world need to hear and that I need to sing? And how do I honor that sound? How do I create that band? What does that album sound like? You know, focus.

So, the time leading up to writing "Still Bad" was very much getting a lot of songs off my chest.

And I don't think I would've been able to write "Still Bad" if I hadn't written all of those, like, hurt body, pained body songs.

Hrishikesh: So, did something happen? Like, was there a specific turning point?

Lizzo: So, I wrote "Love in Real Life," the title track of the album, early spring 2024. And "Love In Real Life" was the first, "Oh, things are gonna be all right!" song that I had written, in like months. And I was like, "Okay. This is the sound."

Shortly after that, "Still Bad" happened.

Ricky: I'm Ricky Reed. I'm a co-writer and producer of Lizzo's "Still Bad."

Lizzo: I did this with Ricky Reed, Blake Slatkin, Cheche,

Ricky: Yeah. Cheche Alara was also in that room.

Lizzo: And Sam Harris from the X Ambassadors.

So I walk in the studio, and it was just like, it was so much passion happening. It was like this country song. Like, "I don't need him, I need a drink."

Ricky: We definitely were talking about country songs. The sort of pocket we were feeling that we were messing around with was a classic sort of stomp clap country. Like "who ow, who, ow, who ow... I don't need him, I need a drink, do, dah, do, dah..." And we just thought that was a blast. But it was really interesting because we didn't really have music. We just kind of had, like, a lyric and a feeling.

Hrishikesh: Can I ask you, how did you even start with this country idea? Because it feels so different from what I think of when I think of Lizzo's music.

Ricky: (laughs) We were having a lot of fun, and starting a lot of our days with almost like, you know, what's the opposite thing? What's the least expected thing?

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Ricky: 'Cause the hardest thing ever is to sit down and be like, let's write a uptempo dance pop... like, that is so hard.

So, if you wanna have songs that you feel like are great and infectious and high-energy, for me, sometimes the best way to get there is to start with a good feeling that's just not so on the nose. And then see where it leads you.

Hrishikesh: And then Lizzo came in and uh, what was her reaction to it?

Ricky: She loved the feeling of it. We had been experimenting with so many genres that she was just down to go on the ride.

Lizzo: I walk in and I'm like, "Okay." I'm like, "What's going on here? It's a vibe!"

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: "It's a vibe all the time." And they were like, "We just have this, like, country song on our hearts."

Sam Harris, he did the, "I don't need him, I need a drink." And I was just like, "Well, that doesn't resonate with me right now."

And he was like, "Well, let's just write the country song." I said, "Cool." But I had to reframe it in my brain to write it by being like, actually, I'm not talking about a man. I'm talking about the world. A breakup song with the world.

Ricky: So it was really interesting. We, like, had a decent amount of, like, a feel, and then we sat down with instruments, we're like, is this guitar or piano? Like we just had a lyric and a feeling. And that would end up setting the stage for the creation of this song.

Lizzo: It was like, these, like kind of minor chords, like (imitates instrumental) I can actually play 'em for you.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, let's listen to the voice memo.

(first demo voice memo)

("With like crazy Gnarls Barkley synths..." / "One more time, Ricky? For the..." (humming) / "...get it, get it..." / if I (humming) / If I (humming) / Don't stop, get it, get it / (humming) / Don't stop, get it, get it /)

Lizzo: Can you believe that's how "Still Bad" started?

Ricky: Oh my god... My memory of it is kicking around a bunch of different things that we liked. "I don't need him, I need a drink."

Lizzo: Oh my god, we had so many lyrics and I just, I needed, I needed to write everything. I think that's how we work, especially me and Ricky. We have to write every lyric possible.

"I swore I'd never leave my bed / God damn, I can't believe it came to this / I should go Britney, shave my head / Then write a book about everything he said."
(laughs)

And then we're like, "Okay, let's whittle it down."

Hrishikesh: Were you still thinking about this in the scope of what you said, breaking up with the world as opposed to a particular person?

Lizzo: Yeah. I had to, because I can't write songs that don't resonate with me on a personal level.

Like, I had a whole period where I did throw my phone away. I didn't have my phone.

(Vocal stem: "I'm 'bout to throw my phone away...")

Hrishikesh: The phone being the conduit to the world?

Lizzo: Yes. Because it's like social media's on there. Your friends, your family. I had so many relationships go.

I had been a very, like, boundary-less person, and if I continued to allow the world to affect me, and the press and social media to like, tell me who I am or like, cuss me out or like, talk shit about me or make a joke about me, or, you know, at my expense, I'm gonna lose my mind. And I'm so grateful that I have music to kind of be my therapist. But I think in real time, during this album, music saved my life. And I would be like, "Oh my gosh, like, I want to die today, but I also have to go in the studio at 12." (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Lizzo: So it's like, you know, go in and write about it.

Hrishikesh: Did you explain all this? That you're like, this is actually a metaphor for me.

Lizzo: I did. And very annoyingly, I tried to change the lyric. I was like, "I don't need this." "I don't need them." But we always found our way back to "him."

(Vocal stem: "I don't need him, I need a drink")

Hrishikesh: I think it must be hard to be going through that, and then try to write about it, if you don't have the right personalities around you.

Lizzo: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: So, how did you and Ricky Reed start working together?

Lizzo: I had put out a tape, Big Grrrl, Small World.

And Ricky dm'd me. He was like, "Come to LA, I'd love to work with you." I was like, I'm busy. (laughs)

I didn't have any awareness of like, the music industry and how it worked and how songwriters work and how pr- I didn't, I'm very from the rap world of like, send me some beats and I'll write to it, and I'll, I'll give you a credit when it drops. (laughs) Like, very much that.

I didn't know what he wanted. I was like, why do I have to come to LA? Just send me some beats, you know?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: But I get there, and he was like, "You're so talented. Like, let's just get in the studio and just, like, vibe." I was like, "Cool. That I understand."

He was like "What, so what, what do you wanna say right now? What do you wanna say?" And I was just like, "What do you mean, what do I wanna say? Like, let me sit over here. You play the beat and I'll write the words."

But I sat with him and I was like, wait, what the fuck is going on here? He had me singing like goddamn Aretha Franklin. I don't—, well I could never sing like her, but I was singing soul and singing in a register that I had never sang in before. And I was like, "My voice sound like it's not coming out my throat, like, what's happening?"

And he had pushed me to this limit that I was just like, wow. I've never experienced anything like that. Learning how to collaborate and learning how to, like, write a song with a producer from the first chords, that was all very new to me and, and Ricky introduced me to it. It's a very special relationship. There's no

one like Ricky when it comes to, like, pushing me to be, like, the best.

And I used to hate it. And now I'm like, "Oh my gosh, no one else does this to me. I need more." (laughs)

Ricky: You know, I'm a firm believer that the best Lizzo songs always have a lyric melody perspective that sort of transcends space and time. (laughs)

We were really trying to get to a core story and a core lyric and melody before we got heavy on the production. Now, what I would learn is by pushing off the production as much as I did in the early stages would lead to us getting used to very, very unproduced demos, which would make it more challenging to actually finish production down the line.

Lizzo: This man will send you a text at like seven in the morning, and he's like, "Yeah, just been, uh, what do you think about this version?"

(second demo)

(Vocals: "I don't need him, I need a drink / Need me a one night stand with Vegas, what y'all think? / Cheers, bitch, it's been a day / Let's turn my pain into some champagne, baby / I said no, you won't get me out my zone / I said no, or my soul / Don't stop, get it, get it / What's that, can you feel it? / We back in the building / Still bad, don't forget it / Ahhh / Still bad, don't forget it / Ahh...")

So the country song turned into that first. That was the first iteration of it.

(demo fades out)

Hrishikesh: And how did you feel about that direction?

Lizzo: I was like, 'cause we were going for like (sings Gnarls Barkley song) "Crazy."

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: "Does that make me crazy?"

And I was like, "This is sick. This is cool. I like it." I love everything when I first make it, 'cause it's my baby. And then you sleep on it and you're like, "Mm... mm-mm".

Hrishikesh: And what wasn't right about it, for you?

Lizzo: It didn't feel fresh. And a lot of times, Ricky, 'cause there are times where I was

like, "This is sick." And he's like, "No, I don't think this is it."

Ricky: We would work on one for a week, two weeks, and then be like, this isn't really getting there. Let's try a different version.

(third demo)

(Vocals: "I'm 'bout to throw my phone away / Can't let my girls know, bro been fuckin' with my day")

That day we're like, let's try a piano thing. But then once Cheche's at the piano, maybe we shouldn't do, "oh, oh." And we do the pre-chorus, which we have now.

(Vocals: "He knocked medown / Thought I'd never get my fine ass off the ground, oh-oh / But I'm ready now / 'Cause it's diva season, baby, let's go out")

So maybe we didn't keep anything from that production, but it led us to the lyric and melody of the pre-chorus.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Ricky: And I was working on basslines and I was like, maybe this song needs a bassline.

(fourth demo)

(Vocals: "I'm 'bout to throw my phone away")

This is the demo that ends up being the first time we say, "Oh shit, I think we have something here."

(Vocals: "He act like he can't be replaced")

I went in trying to just get the feeling out of it. I wanted to tell the story musically of, we're gonna start the verse with Lizzo knocked down.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Ricky: And I wanted to get to the chorus with her winning.

(Vocals: "I don't need him, I need a drink / Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby / Like cheers, bitch, it's been a day / Might take the last flight out to Vegas, what y'all think? (Okay) / I don't need him, I need a drink...")

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Lizzo and Ricky Reed continues after this.

Hrishikesh: You had all these different versions and demos that you were trying; did you have a sense of what it was you were looking for?

Ricky: They all sound great, but... when we thought about the statement that she was trying to make with this album, I think one of the things that would define a lot of these versions that didn't work, was that they didn't have that grit and that urgency.

Lizzo: We listened to, like, Franz Ferdinand. That was the turning point, listening to Franz Ferdinand.

Ricky: And so then, one of the versions of that where I tried to put a harder edge on it.

(fifth demo)

This is my favorite one that didn't make it:

Lizzo: Oh my God, I loved this version!

(Vocals: "I'm bout to throw my phone away / Can't let my girls know, bro been fuckin' with my day / He act like he can't be replaced, okay")

Ricky: I'm playin' drums, too, just like an asshole.

(Vocals: "Well, he gon' hate to see me leave but love to watch me walk away / He knocked me down / Thought I'd never get my fine ass off the ground, oh / But I'm ready now / Think I'm acting different, watch me double down / I don't need him, I need a drink / Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby")

We were starting to get an idea of what the album would sound like.

It's around that time we're really experimenting with— I don't wanna oversimplify it and just say that it's rock. It's about urgency and energy.

Lizzo: I have been studying the origin of rock and roll, because I'm gonna be playing Sister Rosetta Tharpe. And rock and roll, at its origin, was this mixture of gospel and guitar and distortion and audacity. (laughs)

Ricky: That leads us to, okay, what if we took that demo, that one I mentioned where I

was, like, getting the feeling of it...

(fourth demo again)

(Vocals: "He knocked me down / Thought I'd never get my fine ass off the ground")

That was like our main demo of the song for a long time. So what if we took that, and we just played it like a band?

("Still Bad" by LIZZO - intro kick drum)

That's what sets us on the path to the final version.

We set up to do this day, we set up like a band. So we brought in Victor Indrizzo, longtime Lizzo collaborator, one of my favorite drummers of all time.

Lizzo: Ricky plays bass.

(add bass)

Ricky: And then I played three distinct guitar performances as if it was like an indie band with three guitarists.

(add guitars)

(Vocals: "Plot twist, I'm doing great")

Lizzo: "Plot twist, I'm doing great," was like the first lyric that I was like, "Oh my God, I can't wait to say this. Like, I can't wait for people to hear me say this, and I can't wait for people to say it themselves." Oh! So satisfying.

Hrishikesh: What do you love about it?

(music drops out)

Lizzo: I just loved the cheekiness of it, but also it was so bold. Because it was, like, real to me. I was like, there are people who want to see me miserable. And so to say "Plot twist, I'm doing great," I was proud of myself for being able to get to a point where I can say that and I'm like, ha ha! It's petty. It's very "ha ha! You thought that I was gonna be sad forever, but, you know, I grew." And that line is a deeply satisfying line.

Ricky: The palm muted thing goes (imitates guitar).

Lizzo: Oh, it's my favorite part of "Still Bad."

And it was like a main character in the version I played for you.

(fifth demo again)

(Vocals: "He knocked me down / Thought I'd never get my fine ass off the ground")

I remember we played it for the label. They were like, they were like, "This song is so good until that fucking guitar line." And I was like, "No, my precious!" And so we had to get rid of it.

And then like, we were almost done with the song and I was like, can we bring back (imitates guitar)?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Lizzo: And like, it's like a different tone,

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: That kind of matches the vibe of this record. But we slid it into the bridge because I fought for it.

(Gang vocals: "Don't stop, get it, get it / She back in the building / Still bad, don't forget it")

Hrishikesh: One of the things I love in the song are these gang vocals.

Can you tell me about making those?

Lizzo: So, Ricky has created this, like, tradition of me calling my friends and being like, "Hey, you around? Come hop on this record and just be like, "Yaya-ee! Woo! Hahaha!" You know? And we're just, like, laughing and it, like, just brings life to the record. And um, and I think it needed party. 'Cause it's just like, "Let's go to Vegas. Let's turn our pain into champagne. We need a drink."

But this time I didn't have any friends anymore! (laughs)

Hrishikesh: 'Cause you'd thrown your phone away?

Lizzo: I'd threw my phone away, and my only friends don't live in LA. And so I was just like, okay. We're the party track. So that's me, that's Blake Slatkin, that's Sam Harris and Ricky Reed. Just in a room clapping and, and hoe-downing with each other. (laughs)

It was really nice though.

Ricky: That's, like, 5 friends having fun and doing what felt right in the moment.

(Gang vocals: "Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby / Like cheers, bitch, it's been a day")

Hrishikesh: I felt like I could hear multiple layers of your voice in different registers.

Lizzo: So, I'll sit and I'll be like, all right, this time I'm gonna do the, "Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby." Then it's like, okay, this time I'm gonna do, like, a lower voice. "Let's turn the pain into some champagne, baby." Or like a, "Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby." Or give like a raspy one. Like, "Let's turn this pain into some champagne, baby."

You gotta give it different characters so that, like, it feels like a shit-ton of people (chuckles) and it's so fun. I'll be like, all right, this is the bratty one. This is the nasally one. This is the airy one. This is the full-bodied one. This is the fast vibrato. This is the slow vibrato.

Hrishikesh: And what about Blake, Ricky and Sam? Are they also inhabiting other characters?

Lizzo: They're trying to. (laughs) They're trying to.

Ricky: I think anytime you have a lyric like "throw ass,"

We gotta do a gang vocal on "throw ass".

(Gang vocals: "Throw ass... / real love, real life!")

Lizzo: At that point we're listening to the song and I'm like, that needs a lift. And Ricky is so fucking weird when it comes to harmonies. Like, he doesn't do just like major triad shit.

He'll be like, what about, um, (whispers) ("Been a minute")? And I'm like, what? Boy, that's not gon work. And he's like, well, if you sing it softly, it'll work. I'm like, all right. And I do it and I'm like,

(Vocal harmonies: "Been a minute")

Oh, that was weird. And it, like, perks your ears up. And you won't even really notice it, but you feel it.

(Vocals: "I don't need him, I need to throw ass, been a minute / Break fast with my bitches / Real love, real life, damn, I've been missing")

Ricky: For me, it's the ad lib going into chorus two. Anytime she does the belt, and she's like all out of air, she's holding that long, loud, high note for what feels like 10 minutes, and then she still has enough air to give you a "Woo!"

(Vocals: "Feeling crazy lately, baby, let's go out, woo!")

Lizzo: It used to be "Think I'm acting different? / Watch me double down." You know? That was the old, like, lead-in to the hook.

And now it was like "feeling craaaazy lately, baaaby." Like the "A"s, the vowel sound is just so much more fun to sing.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: Instead of "Acting different. Watch me..." You know, we think about things like that, too.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lizzo: But also like, "feeling crazy lately" it's just more relatable. So I really love doing it. It's so tedious, but I always feel like it yields the best results.

Hrishikesh: So, after all of that revising and rewriting the music and the production and the lyrics, when it came time to record the song, did it still feel like something you were enjoying?

Lizzo: Oh, God! That's such a great question.

Ricky: Lizzo loved this song so much from the beginning that every time we looked at it, she was excited to just tap back in.

Lizzo: Yes. So by the time it was ready to, like, record the vocal vocal, I was like, "Hell yeah, let's go."

Because being able to write a song like "Still Bad" after coming out of the depression that I was in, is remarkable. And I'm really proud of myself for being able to find myself again after all of that.

Like, I lost a lot. From loss of relationships, to, like, loss of self. Loss of innocence. (chuckles) To come back from all of that and be like, "Shit, how do I

turn this into something that everybody knows and loves?" Because the last thing I wanted was for people to be like, Oh, this is a song about Lizzo, for Lizzo. I wanted people to be like, Jesus, like, did you read the news today? Ugh... Like, I need a drink. We gotta get through this day somehow. Together.

So yes, when I was making it, it was very deeply satisfying and selfish, and I was like, Ooh, this is for me.

And then you get all of that shit out first, and then the songwriter kicks in and you're like, How do I make this for all of us?

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Still Bad," by Lizzo, in its entirety.

("Still Bad" by LIZZO)

Visit songexploder.net/Lizzo to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Still Bad," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me, Mary Dolan, Craig Eley, and Kathleen Smith, with production assistance from 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.