

**Song Exploder**  
**Hurray for the Riff Raff - Alibi**  
**Episode 312**

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.

Just a heads up before we start: this episode contains references to drug use and drug addiction, including in young teens.

Alynda Segarra is a singer and songwriter from the Bronx. They formed Hurray for the Riff Raff in 2007, and since then, they've released eight albums. Their most recent is *The Past Is Still Alive*, which came out in 2024. It was named one of the best albums of the year in the New York Times, the Associated Press, Entertainment Weekly, and The Atlantic, and Pitchfork called it one of the best albums of the decade so far. For this episode, I spoke to Alynda about the first track on the album, "Alibi."

*("Alibi" by HURRAY FOR THE RIFF RAFF)*

*(Vocals: "You know, you know that time / Can take you for a spin / Can really do you in / Can leave you with the bends / Baby, try to live again / And play another hand / Maybe we'll start a band / I wanna understand / Baby, help me understand")*

Alynda: My name's Alynda Segarra. And my band is called Hurray for the Riff Raff.

Hrishikesh: I get the sense from this song that there's a lot of history that went into it, but I was wondering, for you, where does the story of this song begin?

Alynda: I think this song started shortly after I released my album *Life On Earth*, the album before *Past Is Still Alive*. I released that in February 2022. And putting out a record so shortly after the pandemic was honestly hell. (chuckles) It was, it just felt really hard, I hadn't put out a record in a long time. Traveling and touring was so scary and stressful. I was just feeling like, is the world ending? You know, like, is music ever gonna be the same? Am I ever gonna be able to pay my rent? Like, I was feeling so much fear. Just feeling like, I don't know if I can do this anymore, and I don't know how to do anything else. Making music and writing songs is my purpose in life. So it was a really scary time period.

But it was creating this urgency to be like, okay, let's just give it one more go, and let's write as many songs as we can, and be as bare as possible. And at least I can tell myself, okay, I really gave it my all.

So I was at home in New Orleans. I don't live there anymore, but I still lived there

at the time. And I was going on walks every day around the bayou and this line, "You don't have to die if you don't wanna die," was just ringing through my head. 'Cause I felt, like, a metaphorical death happening in my life.

I remember coming home and having this idea in my head and, you know, there was this classical guitar that I had lying around. And I really liked finger picking on it.

*(classical guitar - finger picking pattern)*

And I'd been trying to mess around with different chord shapes, even if I didn't know what the chords were. Just to try to, like, find some inspiration. I was getting so sick of my cowboy chords, you know.

So I started playing this little finger picking pattern with these chords that I didn't even know what they were, and it just really transported me. It was like a trick. All of a sudden, I felt like the wheels started turning.

*(voice memo vocals: "You don't have to die if you don't wanna die / You can take it all back... live your life / Maybe even be a good friend of mine / Baby I")*

I'm just doing stream-of-consciousness and it'll be like 30, 40 voice memos of me just trying to figure out, what is this song supposed to be?

*(cont. vocals: "We don't have to cry if we don't wanna cry / Maybe I got something left in this heart of mine / Washed up in the sand on the beach of time / Baby I")*

Sometimes when I'm writing, a line appears to me, and it feels this pin on a map, and the map is just blank and it feels like an obsession of like, how do I get there? What are you trying to tell me? You know? So that's what was going on with this one.

*(cont. vocals: "You could take it all back in the nick of time")*

"You can take it all back in the nick of time, maybe even be a good friend of mine."

*(cont. vocals: "Maybe even be a good friend of mine / Baby I")*

I was thinking like, how do I stop being my own enemy? And I really liked, "You could take it all back in the nick of time." Like, what if you just like held on a little longer?

And then I need to listen back later, and be like, okay, now that I'm out of the

emotion of it, now I can think critically about the craft of it. To meditate on, what does this mean? "You don't have to die if you don't wanna die." And it brought up all these people that I grew up with, that I really loved, who were struggling with addiction, and how I would just do anything to be able to make this sickness that they had go away.

I grew up in New York. I grew up in the Bronx. But I got into punk pretty early, when I was like 13. And it was really a lifeline for me. I was struggling with depression as a kid and this, like, punk scene that was happening in New York City at the time was so important to me. And it really became my family. And I just knew a lot of kids really struggling with heroin and it was just so easy to get and so cheap.

Hrishikesh: How did you manage to escape that?

Alynda: I was just really scared of doing any drugs. I was so afraid of being out of control. I mean, also my dad was a Vietnam vet, you know, so I heard plenty about the guys at the Veteran's Hospital, struggling with addiction.

I remember really arguing with a close friend of mine. We were both probably 14 years old, and at the time I felt so grown. And they were like, "You know, this is just my life path. Like, this was just set out for me. I think I'm gonna be an addict. My dad was an addict." You know, that was the story they were telling me. And we were just two little kids, but at the time, we felt like we were ancient, you know? And I was trying to be like, this doesn't have to be your fate.

That memory led me to that frustration and that love and that just trying to break through to somebody. And it led to, "I see your track marks poking out your hoodie sleeve."

*(voice memo vocals: "Thawing out my heart like meat / I see your track marks poking through your hoodie sleeve / A tic-tac-toe game to your destiny / I grieve")*

I want my language to be specific and I want it to be so true to me and my life. And that image felt really like, okay, this is true.

*(cont. vocals: "Sleeping by East River Park / You told me your big secret on the FDR / I couldn't hear you through the tears and the whirring cars")*

We would get in trouble if we drank in Tompkins Square Park, which is where I used to hang out as a kid. So we would go to East River Park and it would just be like all these train riders and older, crusty punks and people would get some food on their food stamps and they'd grill, and there'd be dogs everywhere. And people would be playing tapes on their, like, boom boxes and people would be

doing drugs. And it was just like this world that I was in, and it kind of felt like this was my version of like family barbecues, you know? (laughs)

And as a young kid, because I was searching for belonging, you know, I was really wrapped up in what my friends were going through and it was a way for me to not have to think about, well, where am I going? What do I wanna do, and what, how am I hurting myself?

And I just really thought that loving someone meant just giving up everything and being totally devoted. And I had to learn... honestly, making a band and starting to write songs was what gave me a structure in my life and what gave me a structure in relationships.

*(voice memo vocals: "You don't have to die if you don't wanna die / Maybe I got something left that is worth a try / But I'm not gonna be your alibi")*

I get so much clearer when I know the name of the song. When the name appears, then you have the story. Like, maybe the lyrics aren't totally fleshed out yet, but "Alibi," it's this feeling of being an outsider to an experience that you're witnessing, that you're so wrapped up in and you're so worried about. But I don't wanna be a part of covering this up or hiding it from somebody, hiding it from yourself.

I have to try to convince you that you deserve to get out of this and you deserve more. But I can't be around for the, the downfall. It's too painful for me. That was what "Alibi" said to me. And I guess it also worked with me talking to myself. You know, if like, okay, if we're gonna do this one more time, then do it with everything you got.

*(cont. vocals: "You know, you know that time / Can take you for a spin / Can really do you in / Can leave you with the bends / Baby, try to live again / ... take my hand / Maybe we'll start a band / Just try to understand / Oh baby, help me understand")*

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Alynda Segarra continues after this.

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Hrishikesh: When it came time to record, did you already know if there was someone that you wanted to work with as a producer?

Alynda: I had time booked with Brad Cook. We had made our first record together with *Life on Earth*, and I just loved the process and I thought it was really challenging, and I thought I was making the best work I'd ever made, and I knew I wanted to do it again. You know, I knew that he was the person that could push me.

So I had studio time booked for March. And then, maybe three weeks before, my dad passed away very suddenly. So my mind and my body and my spirit were all just in a totally shell-shocked place by the time I got to the studio.

With this song in particular, Brad kept telling me, "This is not a finger picking song. This is like a banger. This is like an anthemic song." He kept telling me that, and I was just like, so in the muck of my mind. I was like, "I don't know what you're talking about." I just couldn't hear it. I thought it was gonna be finger picking, like, no percussion. And he was like, "We need to get this driving energy to this song."

So I was like, ok, let's try it. (laughs)

*(acoustic guitar)*

So we add drums.

*(add drums)*

Yan Westerlund is playing drums.

Brad adds some bass.

*(add bass)*

*(instrumental ends)*

But I could not get the vocal take. I just like, the vocals felt so hard. I was so not used, I was like, am I supposed to be happy? I was just like, I don't know how to sing this song at, like, this different, driving feel. It felt like I was doing an impersonation of myself.

But then his brother, Phil Cook, came in and laid down this guitar line.

*(electric guitar)*

I was like, holy shit. This is classic.

*(add acoustic guitar)*

When I heard that guitar line, I just saw such an expansive highway, desert, nowhere. Like, it just felt so lonesome to me, but it also felt driving. And I just remember being like, oh my God, that's it. That's the song.

*(Vocals: "You know, you know that time / Can take you for a ride / Can take you by surprise / Maybe you'll roll snake eyes / Baby, tell me why / You gotta play your luck? / Two aces call your bluff / I love you very much / And all that other stuff")*

The choruses is when we get to the present day, where it's me looking back on my life.

"Time can take you for a ride, can take you by surprise. Maybe you'll roll snake eyes." That also felt very much of that street kid world and New York, hanging outside in the park world. Just people playing craps, people like playing box cars. It made me think about gambles that we take, you know, whether it's like, trying out a drug or getting fucked up, or trying to start a band or, you know, just all the gambles that we take all the time.

Hrishikesh: But then in the second chorus, you have different lyrics, which I thought was interesting.

Alynda: Yeah. You know, I thought about Dolly Parton, 'cause I, I read something that said that Dolly really thinks that if there is a change you can make in a lyric, you should do it. Like, don't get lazy. So I thought about that.

*(Vocals: "You know, you know that time / Can take you for a spin / Can really do you in / Can leave you with the bends / Baby, try to live again")*

I'd been plagued by this image of getting the bends. And this feeling of going really deep into memory and that you have to be careful about how you come back into the present world, because you can get the bends. 'Cause you're going so deep. So I was learning how to be gentle with myself about memory and coming back to, well, here I am right now and right now I'm, I'm safe actually.

*(Vocals: "Time / Can take you for a spin / Can really do you in / Can leave you with the bends / Baby, try to live again / And play another hand / Maybe we'll start a band / I wanna understand / Baby, help me understand")*

So me and Brad get very, when it comes to harmonies it becomes very like we're one brain, and he's just like pointing up, pointing down, saying a note and I'll start singing it and it's like, it feels like I'm surfing.

*(Vocals: "'Cause you don't have to die if you don't wanna die / Maybe I got something left that is worth a try / But I'm not gonna be your alibi / This time")*

This record really was a next chapter for me, in my life and as an artist. This time in my life that I thought was an ending, suddenly it was like, oh my God, it's only just beginning. Especially when this song came out, and the way that people responded to it, it felt immediately different than any other time in my career. And I just felt like, whoa, I'm not giving up on this. We're gonna do this.

And I felt my dad with me. I felt his spirit. You know, when I was in the studio, you know, I brought photos of him and I don't know, it just felt like he was there with me and he was looking out for me. And then, "You don't have to die if you don't wanna die," suddenly that started to mean, my father will never die, because he lives on in me and he lives on in my music and in my stories, and this song suddenly had this whole new meaning.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Alibi," by Hurray for the Riff Raff, in its entirety.

*("Alibi" by HURRAY FOR THE RIFF RAFF)*

Go to [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Alibi," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, 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.