

Song Exploder
Suki Waterhouse - Back in Love
Episode 318

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 has some explicit language.

Suki Waterhouse is a singer-songwriter, actress, and model from London. She released her first single in 2016, and her first album, *I Can't Let Go*, in 2022, on Sub Pop. You might have seen her in the show *Daisy Jones & The Six*, which came out in 2023. Since then, she's also had her first child, with her partner Robert Pattinson. And all of that history figured into her new album, *Loveland*. For this episode, Suki told me about how she made the song "Back in Love" with her longtime collaborators, producer Jules Apollinaire and songwriter Natalie Findlay. "Back in Love" was the first single from her album, but it was the last song that was written for it.

("Back in Love" by SUKI WATERHOUSE)

(Vocals: "Oh, I'm loving my lust for life / Turning the dark to light / Happiness hits me when / I'm back in love again")

Suki: I'm Suki Waterhouse.

Hrishikesh: What was going on in your life around the time when you first started working on "Back in Love?"

Suki: It was in December and I kept flying back to London to work with my longtime collaborators, Jules Apollinaire and Natalie Findlay, who I met when I was like 18, 19. And I was a huge fan of Nat's. She has a project called Findlay. And I got talking to them and that was kind of like how we first met and started making music together, and now we've been doing it for, yeah, longer than ev- over a decade.

It's the most amazing thing when you find your tribe. It's hard to explain, like, how much of a joy it is and how much of, like, a shorthand we have. And it's like the best thing ever. It's always such a giggle working with them. It's very kind of, like, "forget about the outside world." A lot of the times we hole up in their kind of studio in East London where they also live. Like it's, an old warehouse that's kind of, like, all open. Their dog's running around. But this song in particular, I was kind of at the end of writing, and the album didn't feel quite complete yet. I just knew that there was a song left.

Hrishikesh: As in, you didn't have enough songs for the album? Like, you needed more?

Suki: I definitely didn't need more. Yeah. I think I had like 70 songs for this.

Hrishikesh: Hm.

Suki: But it's just knowing. It's like, you know when you've given all the blood that you have. And I knew, especially with Nat and Jules, that we hadn't, like, quite reached that peak yet. Um, so the phrase going around that day was like, "If it's not like, like literally what we think is like a classic, then we're not recording it."

(voice memo - instrumental)

That day that we started writing was actually like not going very well at all. Me and Jules, we had this loop going, and he was playing guitar, and we had this song called "If a Lady Was Your Lover." *sings* "If a lady was your lover...."

And it was, like, so, (chuckles)

(voice memo - vocals: "If a lady was your lover")

And Nat was just like not having it, and she was like, "This is weird. This sucks. This is not universal. This is like not the thing that we were setting out to do." And just like, the day had, like, really gotten away from us.

Then I had like this, yeah, something that I, I just shouldn't have even planned in the first place, but I had an audition, like a Zoom audition for a TV show. It was absolutely terrible. Like, I'm balancing on the couch, 'cause the studio's very dark in there. There's like no overlighting. It's all just lamps and everything. And the casting director's like, "This is terrible." Like, "I, I can't see you." Like, "You can't do this audition." I'm like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." Like, it was just, like, a mess.

But when I came back into the room, they'd been, like, locked away together and Nat had been, yeah, I guess she has, like, a mouth trumpet going. (laughs)

(voice memo - mouth trumpet melody)

(voice memo - Natalie: "There's something there I think." / Jules: "Sick.")

Jules had got the sitar out and had made this intro.

(sitar intro)

And I walked in and I was like, "Oh, this feels like the gates of heaven are opening."

It's funny, like, so much of our work is, like, trying things and, like, yeah, making, like, voice memos and doing things that, like, don't end up going anywhere or we kind of just, like, forget about them or we're just like, yeah, distracted by something or, like, ordering food or, like, playing with the dog.

And then there's suddenly, like, a collective energy where we all start, like, actually kind of, like, focusing.

(voice memo - Wurlitzer)

That's Jules translating the mouth trumpet melody onto the Wurlitzer.

(voice memo - Wurlitzer with Jules singing along)

(voice memo - Suki singing: "Da-da-da-da-da-da...")

That's me!

(voice memo - Suki singing: "We're back in love again." / Jules: "Yeah. That's right (chuckles)" / Suki: "Ooh-oh")

"Back in Love", like, came out of my mouth. And me and Nat were giggling about it 'cause we were like, maybe we were talking, like, about TikToks that we'd seen or something, but I was like, "Oh, you know, like when, like a man fixes a light bulb or something, and then you're like, "Oh, I'm back in love." Or like, they mowed the lawn or took out the trash or like something like that, and you're like, "Wow." You're like, "You got your shit down."

Like, yeah, it's, I've been with Rob for, like, eight years now and it's like you're always in love, and then sometimes you just get like, "Oh my God," like a huge pang and you're just like, "I'm obsessed." So that was, like, where the "Back in Love" phrase came from. (chuckles) A lot of the times, like, honestly, like, if we just get three words, just like a little phrase, you're like, "Okay. We can build around this."

(intro instrumental)

Once that intro came out, the music flowed really easily.

Hrishikesh: Is Jules playing all the instruments, or most of the instruments?

Suki: Jules plays everything. And I remember, like, the opening lyrics, like, "Loneliness is a featherbed."

(Vocals: "Loneliness is a featherbed")

Hrishikesh: Where did that lyric come from?

Suki: I, like, started working when I was like 15, like, I started modeling when I was 15. And definitely, like, very young. It opened, like, so many doors for me and, like, got, you know, opened me up to like so much culture, and traveled a lot. It's like, you're living your dreams in so many ways.

But, but there's, like, a loneliness in that. And when you, like, start doing something that just involves like a lot of travel, you just, like, you're not a great, you can be a great friend, like, over the phone, but you're not there for all the moments, and you stop kind of like going out every week with the same group of people and it kind of falls away. And so there's like an isolation in that lyric.

I still wanted it to feel glamorous, but it's like, being in a beautiful bed, like, by yourself, or feeling by yourself.

(Vocals: "Loneliness is a featherbed")

And then Nat just suddenly, like, came out with the, "Eyes closed, sitting in silence."

(Background vocals: "Eyes closed, sitting in silence")

I was, like, putting myself in the place of like, "What's it like when I'm present with myself?" Which isn't that fucking often, but I, like, daydream about sitting by myself in silence.

(Isolated lead and background vocals: "Whole life hanging by a thread / (Eyes closed, sitting in silence) / Shoot the apple off my head / (You choose, sugar or violence)")

And there I can, like, hear the musical references. I think we'd listened to Dusty Springfield. "Son of a Preacher." And like, Primal Scream, "Loaded", like 60s, psychedelic. That was like the musical feeling.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, I feel like that comes through a lot. Has that kind of music been a big part of your musical identity for a long time?

Suki: Yeah. Yeah, I think it is. I think there's always been this, like, draw to the '60s. And I remember when I was, like, 18, I would, like, completely dress like a, a

mod. And I was always in, like, white tights and, and I've always, yeah. It sounds, like, really cringey to say, but I kind of felt like I should've been there. I know it's, that, that sounds, like, so cringey. I sound like such a dick.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

(drums)

And what about the end of the verse, the "shooting an apple off your head" and "sugar and violence"?

Suki: I think in a lot of this album there's like, I definitely was feeling quite, like, volatile, you know? You wouldn't really think it's like a "post-having-a-baby" record. But there's, like, definitely a lot of, like, raging postpartum hormones going on. (chuckles)

And I feel like, do you know what I mean? I feel like m- like in those lines sometimes that were coming out, it's almost like this maternal like, "Don't fuck with me," kind of thing. And like, there's a kind of, like, protective rageness.

(instrumental fades out)

I feel like there's this part of me that's like this craziness of me that's, like, been unlocked, where, like, I've, I've always been like the very chill person and like anything goes. And like I was saying, like when I first started working, it was like that's like a very much an industry where you're like having to be, like, pleasing and like being pleasing visually and like that's like probably stuff that I'm, like, trying to, like, overcome still today.

But, like, yeah, now I feel like I've got, like, a loaded gun and there's like this thing in my life that... I have something to, like, protect and something to lose now. It's made me more fierce. Like I'm obsessed with, like, mother's instinct at the moment, and like, I've just become, like, more aware to listen to my instincts.

That's actually something that's kind of like playing into being an artist, I think, actually, is like, when you're, like, making your record and choosing the songs and like you make something in like a very pure way and, like, you don't really care what anybody else thinks when you're making it and then there's like the, showing it to people, and do the, like, label like it? Do your team like it? What do they think about it? And like, you can get, like, crushed quite quickly and, like, if you really believe in it, sometimes you have to, like, go to, like, fight for stuff and sometimes you just get tired fighting and you like relent to something and then you, like, feel so fucking pissed that you did that, you know?

Hrishikesh: Did that happen at all with this song?

Suki: So, we wrote the chorus and I had written with Nat, "I'm losing my lust for life, praying for dark to light. Just when I thought it would end, I'm back in love again." So, like, that is kind of like where my head was. I wasn't in the most positive state of mind, like, while writing it.

So I remember, like, walking with my friend Poppy in Hyde Park the next day and playing her the song, and she's, like, such a good barometer. She's, like, basically A&R's my whole record.

Like, my friend. I can just watch her face. And when it got to the chorus... I don't know, like, the excitement kind of died a little bit and, so I remember, like, going to the studio that day after that walk, and I was like, "Hey, like I, I think we gotta change that. 'Cause it's not that explosion of joy."

But Nat and Jules were, like, so kind of, like, happy with how it was, and yeah, I re- then we, like, kind of argued about it for a while.

'Cause we had "Just when I thought it would end," and I felt like that was, like, weak.

Hrishikesh: Mm.

Suki: "Just when I thought it would end," like, I was like, "Oh, that doesn't feel appealing to me. It's not lighting me up." Actually I'm remembering now, that part, like convincing them that we needed to change it.

And then, you know, we, like, write one line, and then we all start getting excited about it. And it's just, like, one of the coolest things 'cause I think one of us will always have, like, kind of the strong idea if they really don't feel something and, and then it's, like, kind of, battle of the convincing, you know. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: What did the lyrics end up becoming?

Suki: "I'm loving my lust for life. Turning the dark to light. Happiness hits me when I'm back in love again." And then, like, once we got that, it was like, okay, I wanna get to even more like what, what kind of visuals can we have then? And it was like, dancing around like, "Back to jazz on the radio, back to beaches, away we go." That was Nat's line. That's such a Nat line, to be able to kind of like, "Back to beaches, away we go." I love that line.

And then I remember I was thinking about like, when I, like, walk around with Rob and we, like, go on walks together, just I- like late night walks. And when you just

take the strange street home. We kind of go like, "What about we just go, like, this way?" And we go through, like, a, an alleyway or something. And like we both, like, get really excited about going and getting lost on purpose. The enjoyment in there.

("Back in Love" by SUKI WATERHOUSE)

(Vocals: "Oh, I'm loving my lust for life / Turning the dark to light / Happiness hits me when / I'm back in love again / Back to jazz on the radio / Back to beaches, away we go / Taking the long way home / Back in love again")

Hrishikesh: More with Suki Waterhouse, after this.

Hrishikesh: I feel like the second verse is really different from the first verse.

Suki: Yeah, it's kind of like the bridge and the second verse, so it has, like, a whole different melody to it.

(Second verse vocals: "Oh, you're swinging to my body in time / Pour a little sweet wine / You know it's been a hard day's night / Pour another sweet wine")

Nat and Jules had come to Long Pond, to Aaron Dessner's studio, with me for a couple of days. And we had, like, an amazing couple of days upstate. And Aaron would, like, have these amazing wines for us every night. So we'd, like, all been making this, like, song to play Aaron to say thank you for having us. And it was like, (sings) "Aaron Dessner, thank you for the good times and the sweet wine."

And that's how we get to the sweet wine. And that's, you know. And then we're like, "Oh, pour another sweet wine." (chuckles) Sorry, I'm, like, laughing at myself, but that was a past, like, experience, like, kind of winding its way into the song.

(shakers and snaps stem + Jules singing along: "Pour another sweet wine")

Oh yeah, there's, that's us clicking our fingers.

Hrishikesh: Is that Jules singing?

Suki. Yeah. The track is playing in the back, and he's, "Pour a little sweet wine." (chuckles)

It brings such a smile to my face, and it's such a great example of our process in the studio and why we kind of get along so well musically as well as personally 'cause, like, I just, I love imperfection. I love bleed. I don't like things sounding so polished. Like, I wanna hear, like, actually what's happening in the room, and there's, like, there's a magic going on in that room, and there's, not, like, a preciousness between all of us of, like, it has to be so perfect.

Hrishikesh: Okay, I have to ask you about this sound.

(dog bark)

Suki: That's the dog. That is the dog. (laughs) That is hilarious that you've picked that up 'cause that is such a Jules-ism, that he's put the dog in there.

Hrishikesh: It's their dog?

Suki: Yeah. It's, it's Otto. That's so funny. Their dog is the cutest dog in the world. He's quite crazy as well. And it's like a war between trying to record with things that Otto hasn't eaten, that, yeah, that if Otto isn't barking. It's coming back to me now that he put that in there. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: I love it. It's like a percussion part.

Suki: Exa- I love that you found that. (laughs)

(Vocals: "All of the flowers and kisses you sent me / See you catchin' up fast, now you know how to please me")

The original intro was all on sitar. But at some point I was like, "Ah... I think it's trumpets." So Jules was, like, layering it with Mellotron.

(mellotron)

Until we kind of, like, later had, you know, real trumpets put in.

(trumpets)

Sam Ewens is an amazing brass and horn arranger, and he's played the horns.

It kind of explodes at the end into this, like, massive, triumphant outro. I remember just yelling into the microphone like, "So back! I'm back!" And we were kind of all figuring that out at the end and that was really fun.

(Isolated vocals: “So back, I’m back / Back in love again / So back (I’m back in love), I’m back (back in love) / I’m back, I’m back / I’m back in love again / I’m back, I’m back (I’m back) / I’m back in love again”)

I feel like this record was like a pull between, like, the person I was and, like, the new person that's, like, emerging. But this song I think was about knowing I'd got through something, feeling like I'd, like, reconnected with myself.

It's like such a huge change having a child and like, yeah, been going through things that have felt, like, very difficult, but I feel like I'm good. Like the future feels, like, I'm excited about it.

So yeah. I think it was like, I wanted the song to be like a, a reclaiming. And also joyful.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Back in Love” by Suki Waterhouse, in its entirety.

(“Back in Love” by SUKI WATERHOUSE)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream “Back in Love,” and you can watch the music video.

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