

Song Exploder
Olivia Rodrigo - The Cure
Episode 321

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.

Olivia Rodrigo is a Grammy-winning singer and songwriter. In June 2026, she released her third album, *You Seem Pretty Sad for a Girl So in Love*. The day it came out, it broke streaming records on Spotify and Amazon Music, and it debuted at number 1 on the Billboard Charts. I talked to Olivia here in my studio, and I also visited her long-time producer and co-writer Dan Nigro at his studio. Dan Nigro won the Grammy for Producer of the Year in 2025, in part for his work with Olivia Rodrigo. And for this episode, the two of them told me the story of making Olivia's song "The Cure," from the original voice memo to the final version.

("The Cure" by OLIVIA RODRIGO)

(Vocals: "But my head is full of poison, and my heart is full of doubt / I got toxins in my bloodstream, you tried hard to suck 'em out / And it feels like medication, and it's good for me, I'm sure / But it don't matter how your love feels anymore / It'll never be the cure / It'll never be the cure")

Olivia: My name's Olivia Rodrigo.

Dan: And my name is Dan Nigro.

Olivia: We started working together, I think I must have been 16 or 17, which is crazy 'cause I'm 23 now, so he's known me my entire adult life and, you know, lots of my teenage life. We've collaborated on every song that I've ever put out.

Hrishikesh: Were there any kind of big-picture concepts or intentions that you had before you started writing?

Olivia: I set out to write this album, and I knew that I wanted to make it about romantic love in more of a positive sense. I think my last two records were heartbroken and angsty and all the feelings that you feel when you're a teenager, and I just sort of wanted to stretch a muscle and try to write love songs. And it's a hard thing to do as a songwriter, I think. Oftentimes writing a song about how happy in a relationship you are just come across as, like, braggy or weird or vapid.

And so I, I kinda wanted to challenge myself to, to figure out what a love song meant to me and what it sounded like coming out of my mouth. And so, we knew we wanted to do that, and I knew that I wanted to kind of twist it a little bit 'cause I knew all of my favorite love songs were really sad, you know?

Like, like "Love Song" by The Cure, "First Day of My Life" by Bright Eyes or "Video Games" by Lana Del Rey. These are all songs that are about quote-unquote, "being happy in love," but they're kind of devastating, and that's what makes them stick with you and what pulls on your heartstrings so much. I think when you're in a relationship, like a mature sort of relationship, it's like so multifaceted and layered and, you know, not every day is like, "Oh, sunshine and roses, I'm the happiest person in the world."

It's like, complex and, I don't know, I think that's a, a fun challenge as a artist to try to capture that complexity.

Hrishikesh: Where do you think the story of writing this song first starts?

Olivia: I actually remember vividly being in my friend's Jeep. (laughs) And I was sitting in the passenger seat and I was talking to him and I was just like, "You know, I'm making this record and I'm in love and I love this person and I'm just, like, so miserable so much of the time. I'm like, very unhappy." (laughs) And I was like, "I don't know why I can't-- Like I, I just wanna write love songs."

And I remember him expressly telling me, he's like, "You have to write about how you're actually feeling. You can't pretend to write a certain way or you can't write in the way that you think you're supposed to feel. Like, you have to be honest with yourself and that's what's great about music and like you just have to tap into that. It's a gift." And I was like, "Okay... Like, sure."

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me more about those simultaneous feelings of knowing that, "Oh I'm in love with this person, but also I'm so unhappy?" Was it because of being in love that you were unhappy? Like, "I'm so in love I'm miserable," or were these just two separate rivers running in parallel?

Olivia: I don't know... I mean, I think, I think falling in love can really, like, hold a mirror to you and show you parts of yourself that maybe before were kind of dormant. And sometimes you're in love and it's not happy 'cause there's something that's not working, and then that's why you're so sad. And so, I remember kind of feeling emboldened after that conversation and I think a few days later I wrote the initial sort of first draft.

(voice memo guitar)

I'm not great at guitar. I'm, like, still sort of in a permanent state of learning. (laughs) But I was trying to play a chord and I played it wrong. I, like, messed up where my fingers were, but it actually just sounded cool, and I was like, "Oh, that's great." A wonderful thing about being a novice is sometimes you make a happy accident. (laughs) So I started playing a chord progression that I liked.

(voice memo vocals: "All the pretty girls got a face that don't look like mine")

I was just sitting on my couch. It was, like, late at night. And I, I was deep in album mode and when I'm writing, I try to force myself to write a song every day, even if I don't really feel like it.

And I think this was actually one of those times where I didn't feel like it,

(cont. voice memo)

(Vocals: "Thought I'd done enough but they keep moving the line / Thought I'd found the antidote this time / Thought you'd be the antidote this time")

And I wrote a chorus that's, like, kind of bad, so I won't share it. But, um...(chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Really? You don't wanna share the bad chorus?

Olivia: No, it's like, ah, I like, it's, it got a lot better, so it's, I, I, I can't show you 'cause then people are gonna, I don't know, it'll, it'll haunt me. But, um...

Hrishikesh: Can you describe the bad chorus?

Olivia: I think the lyrics were, "I'm unraveling and you can't stitch me up. I thought I'd feel better when I finally fell in love." We scrapped that chorus but kept the "unraveled" part. (laughs) Um... so... That's the thing. Like, people always ask me if I have any advice for people who are kind of just starting out writing songs, and I always say, like, just don't be afraid to write the bad songs or, like, the bad choruses or whatever, 'cause there's always, like, a little nugget that you take and make it into something good.

And so I think you just really can't be precious with it. I am so not a perfectionist when it comes to music, and writing. I just write and write and write, and I think that that's obviously the most joyful way to be, but also just the most productive.

The next day after I wrote this, I brought it to Dan and I was like, "I think that there's something here." And he was like, "Oh yeah, there definitely is something

here."

Dan: She was really excited about it, and I was like, "This is cool and it's dark, and it's not something that I've heard you talk about before."

Olivia: And so we spent the day sort of figuring out the chorus and the bridge.

Dan: I was kinda following her lead. Like, I could tell that she knew what she wanted to say.

Olivia: I remember driving to the studio and, like, being on the freeway on-ramp. And being like, "Oh, the song's called 'The Cure.'" Like, that's the most distilled way to say this. Like, "it'll never be the cure." I remember coming up with that on the way to the studio and then bringing it to Dan. I was like, "This is my verse, and it's gonna be called 'The Cure.'"

Dan: We found the chords to the chorus, and then she started kinda riffing on some stuff.

Olivia: I actually have the voice memo, should I play it?

(chorus voice memo vocals: "My head is full of venom and my heart is full of doubt / There are toxins in my bloodstream and you tried to suck them out / I've got a is a barbituate, it numbs the pain for sure / But it don't matter what you give to me, it'll never be the cure / Be the cure / It'll never be the cure / Be the cure")

It's so funny, it's changed so much, even since then.

But I just remember feeling like we were i-in a really good, (chuckles) like, flow state and we were really getting somewhere with the song.

Dan: With "The Cure," we recorded it so fast. Because I just wanted to quickly get the idea down.

Olivia: We made this whole record in Dan's tiny little studio that's so small, and it was really annoying because the air conditioner didn't work, like, half the time we were making the record. (laughs)

And it was, like, summer and hot... But I love that little studio. We've made so many songs in there. And it just feels so homey. I struggle, like, trying to write, write a good song in a studio that's really grand and beautiful. I don't know. There's just something nice about feeling like you're, you're just in a garage hanging out.

Dan: I was sitting in my chair. She was sitting on the couch. And these two microphones that are up on my piano were there.

And instead of, like, miking the guitar properly, I literally just stood on the piano bench, and played the guitar into the two piano mics.

(acoustic guitar)

And it was like a really, like, rough take. And then she recorded her vocals to my guitar.

(Vocals: "All the pretty girls in the foreground of my mind / I thought I'd done enough, but they keep moving the line")

Olivia: The first lyric is "All the pretty girls in the foreground of my mind, I thought I'd done enough, but they keep moving the line." I don't know, I think it's a lyric that really hits home for me.

I think women in general, and especially women in this industry, it just constantly feels like the goalposts for us are just always changing and nothing's enough, and it's this insatiable beast of, of achievement or beauty or whatever. And just in life I think people benefit so much off of women feeling like they're not enough or they need to be doing more, and it's just so exhausting.

Dan: She recorded the vocal and I was like, "What would it sound like with a double vocal?"

(doubled vocal: "I thought I found the antidote this time / I thought I found the antidote this time")

She did it, and we were like, "Oh, that's cool. That sounds interesting." All of her other records, the vocal's, like, so intimately singular.

Olivia: Yeah, it just makes it feel intense and introspective.

Dan: And there's no Auto-Tune and there's no, like, Melodyne-ing or anything. Like, they're just her vocal tracks. They kind of rub a little bit in spaces that makes it feel unsettling. And I feel like as much as, like, we have all the modern tools that we can like, make a vocal feel perfect, it felt imperfectly perfect.

(more doubled vocal: "And all the nights I spent fighting bad thoughts in my room / Feeling so alone, might as well be on the moon")

So, I wanted to make sure we, like, holistically kept it as raw as possible. I don't wanna change a thing.

But we recorded it so quickly, the day that we recorded it, that I never tuned my guitar. And so my guitar is actually, like, about 15 to 20 cents sharp. And so I ended up having to tune every other instrument to the guitar and the vocal, because I didn't wanna mess with it.

(add piano)

Dan: When I played the piano, because the piano was actually in tune, I had to Melodyne the piano to be in tune with the guitar.

I think the next thing I added to the song was the Juno bass.

(Juno bass)

I wanted it to feel really intense.

(add piano and guitar)

And I like the juxtaposition of something so organic against a synth.

(Vocals: "But my head is full of poison, and my heart is full of doubt / I got toxins in my bloodstream, you tried hard to suck 'em out / And it feels like medication, and it's good for me, I'm sure / But it don't matter how your love feels anymore / It'll never be the cure / It'll never be the cure")

Olivia: "My head is full of poison and my heart is full of doubt. I've got toxins in my bloodstream. You tried hard to suck 'em out. And it feels like medication and it's good for me, I'm sure, but it don't matter how your love feels anymore, it'll never be the cure." So emo. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: I mean, it's brutal.

Olivia: It's brutal (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: The song is addressed to someone. And the idea of saying that to someone: "This is cool and all, but it's not enough-

Olivia: Right.

Hrishikesh: -to actually make me happy."

Olivia: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: Was a version of that conversation something that you had actually had in real life?

Olivia: (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Or was this you figuring out that feeling?

Olivia: I think it was me figuring out that feeling. And I, I honestly think, I think it could be applicable to a lot of things. Like, I think it could be applicable to, like, your career or, like, having this friend or this house or whatever. Like, I don't know. I think that that's been something that I've been learning in my adult life, like all these things that I thought like, "Oh, once I, like, hit this milestone, then I'll feel okay. I'll feel calm, and I'll feel good about myself."

And I think getting older is realizing that, like, no outside forces could ever make you feel totally happy and content. It's, like, totally an inside job. And it sounds kind of cliché, but it was, like, a really hard thing to learn, and I think life kind of teaches you that over and over if you don't really internalize it.

I think I, I went into my first adult relationship sort of thinking like, "Oh, this is gonna be a thing. I'm gonna feel happy. I'm gonna feel great about myself." But I actually think, like, being in a relationship just really complicates all of the issues that you have with yourself. I think it brings them to the surface and sort of makes it a lot harder. And I think that that's why it's so important for people to, like, be in relationships. You know, it's just like the best therapy anyone could ever go through.

You just know yourself so much and you figure out what you want and, like, where your, the cracks in your foundation are, you know? And... yeah.

Hrishikesh: More with Olivia Rodrigo after this.

Olivia: This song is very tense. (laughs) And the production is very tense.

Dan: I build up the guitar really, really intensely going into verse two.

(Vocals: "It'll never be the cure")

I think everyone thinks when they hear it for the first time that, like, the drums are about to come in, but they don't.

(Vocals: "Used to play a game in my head when I'd date a guy / Tally up the girls that he fucked 'til I start to cry")

Olivia: I love that lyric. It's a really harsh sort of visceral line to say, and I think that's why I like it so much.

I remember I was trying to write a, like, a wordy second verse, but couldn't come up with it, and at a certain point I was just like, "What if it's just, 'Baby, I'm unraveled,' like, over and over again?" Sometimes less is more. (laughs)

(Vocals: "I thought I'd found the antidote this time / But I'm unraveled")

I was sort of obsessed with the, the concept of unraveling and I, I loved the visual image that it conjured up. I loved the feeling of the word. Also, I just kind of had this image of falling in love and feeling like all of the artifices and all of these fronts that you put up kind of just had to fall down, and that felt like an unraveling to me. And all of these, like, really deep, raw parts of yourself being brought up in the unraveling was sort of one of the themes of the album.

So yeah, it means so much to me. And yeah, I just love how it kind of grows and, and builds and builds until it kind of, like, reaches a head and I'm just kind of, like, screaming, "I'm unraveled" at the very end.

(Vocals: "I'm unraveled (I'm unraveled) / I'm unraveled (I'm unraveled) / I'm unraveled (I'm unraveled, I'm unraveled) / I'm unraveled")

I remember Dan being like, "Hit that note, the 'I'm unraveled, I'm unraveled.'" And being like, "I don't know," like, "This is a lot. I don't know if I can do that." Like, "This is crazy." And he's like, "Just trust me." And it's, like, turned out to be one of my favorite parts of the song. (chuckles)

(Vocals: "I'm unraveled (I'm unraveled) / I'm unraveled (I'm unraveled) / I'm unraveled")

(add strings)

We have an amazing friend, Paul Cartwright, who does all the strings on, on all of my albums, actually.

Dan: And a lot of the string parts I recorded in MIDI first. Like the do-do-do-do.

(MIDI cello "do-do-do-do" rhythmic ostinato)

Like the chugging cellos are all, like, MIDI. For some reason on this song, I really

liked the way that the MIDI strings sounded, so I just kept them, and then Paul played along to the MIDI strings.

(live and MIDI strings together)

Olivia: I remember him sending me a, a demo of it with strings. It really felt so beautiful and, and dark. I think strings just sound like being in love. You know what I mean? (laughs) But I remember for some reason we, like-- I remember listening to it and was like, I think I was in, like, a really bad mood, and I think I wasn't ready to like hear the subject matter of the song.

It's very honest and raw, and it's, like, kind of hard to admit to yourself that this is how you're feeling. And he sent me a demo, and he's like, "This is great, isn't it?" And I was like, "Yeah, it's okay. I don't really wanna listen to it right now." Like it was almost like too much for me to metabolize or something like that.

And so Dan always makes fun of me for not liking the first draft. (laughs)

(strings)

So you're kind of on the edge of your seat for a while until the drums come in, and that was done very intentionally.

(Vocals: "Why can't you come stitch me up? / Why can't it ever be enough?")

When you abstain from using the drums for so long when they come in, it feels so important, and it, like, really hits you.

(drums come in)

(Vocals: "No, it's not enough")

The drums are played by Sterling Laws, who's this incredible drummer. The fills that he plays feel really emotional. I, like, feel them in my chest when he plays them.

(cont. drums)

One of the reasons why I love this song so much and, and why I love the production so much is it kind of feels like you really have to earn that payoff. You know what I mean? It, it doesn't give it to you right at the first chorus. You kind of have to keep listening. It, like, keeps you s- hopefully sort of engaged until, like, the drums come in and the strings come in, and it feels like this, like, soaring, huge payoff.

(full instrumental with vocals: "All because my head is full of poison, and my heart is full of doubt (I'm unraveled) / I got toxins in my bloodstream you tried so hard to suck out (I'm unraveled) / And it feels like medication, and it's good for me, I'm sure (I'm unraveled) / But it don't matter how your love feels anymore (I'm unraveled) / It'll never be the cure")

I think that the song is a little bit of a question. I think it's not like, "Oh, well I figured out the meaning of love and life, and here it is."

It's like, "Oh, why can't this ever be enough?" Which is the lyric. It's like, it's just genuinely asking, you know what I mean? And I think that it's a concept that I didn't have the, like, emotional intelligence, maybe, to understand when I was 19. Like, fair enough. But I think it took a lot of, like, growing and, and self-discovery and struggle, I think, to like, make this song and come to the realizations that I came to while writing it.

I think it's one of the most introspective songs I've ever written. Yeah, it means so much to me.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Cure," by Olivia Rodrigo, in its entirety.

("The Cure" by OLIVIA RODRIGO)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "The Cure," 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.