

Audible Originals presents:

*Say You're Sorry*

Hosted by Lux Alptraum

## Episode 1: Anatomy Of An Apology

*[intro music; electronic, thoughtful crescendo with guitar notes]*

### Lux Alptraum:

It seems like every day another public figure is issuing an apology. There was the time when Lizzo apologized for accusing a Postmates driver of stealing her food, or when T-Pain apologized for ignoring years of Instagram DMs sent by other celebrities. Even dead people are apologizing. Roald Dahl died in 1990, but that didn't stop his estate from issuing an apology for his antisemitism 30 years later.

A lot of the time, the same questions get thrown around in these moments. Are they really sorry? Is this person canceled? How long do they have to sit on the naughty stool before we're allowed to forgive them? But a lot of other questions, questions about the nature of apologies themselves and why we're so invested in them in the first place, go unaddressed. So I decided to make a show to ask those very questions.

I'm Lux Alptraum. And this is *Say You're Sorry*, a show about public apologies.

*[music fades out]*

I need to start this show with a confession: I'm something of an apology true believer. An apology utopian.

*[inquisitive marimba notes and percussion play in background]*

Basically, I love apologies — and it's because they've *literally* saved me. I have obsessive-compulsive disorder, and it's really easy for me to get sucked into a cycle of blaming myself for every bad thing that's ever happened to me. And when someone apologizes, it helps break that cycle. It's concrete proof that I can hold on to that says that someone else was wrong.

It's not that I think that everyone who apologizes deserves to be forgiven, or that someone saying the words "I'm sorry" means that everyone has to move on. Clearly, a lot of apologies are garbage. But given the choice, I'd rather someone apologize than say stay silent. And most of the time, I think apologies are a net win.

But not everyone agrees with me. In fact, even the *Say You're Sorry* team is deeply split on the question of apologies. Here's producer Siona Peterous's take.

**Siona Peterous:**

I'm gonna be honest here, I'm not someone who thought heavily about the concept of apologies before working on this show. But once I did start thinking about it, I realized I'm someone who simply doesn't care about most apologies. Like, most of them suck. Sure, there's a good one here and there, but overall I think people and institutions panic when called out and say "We're sorry" to avoid any more damage to their reputations. What is the point?

Look, I'm a Black woman from a poor, immigrant background and I've seen how apologies are weaponized against people like me; how "sorry" and other platitudes are used to brush aside the real, structural work that needs to happen to make things right. And that's *if* there's an apology at all.

And in my personal life, I don't generally get the privilege of an apology to help heal my injuries or lighten my burdens. Instead of apologies, I rely on community who show up and show out for me when I need it. So yeah, to me, an apology without changed behavior isn't just mad annoying, it's incredibly harmful. I'd honestly rather someone just keep it moving than give me a meaningless apology.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Siona and I were already working on this show when a particularly interesting apology went viral: Justin Timberlake apologizing to Britney Spears and Janet Jackson.

And so we started talking about it. And, maybe unsurprisingly, we didn't see eye to eye. But before we get to that, let's talk about why Justin was apologizing in the first place.

**Scaachi Koul:**

Justin Timberlake has been in the public consciousness for my whole life. And I'm 30, so that gives you some sense of his trajectory.

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's Scaachi Koul, a culture writer at BuzzFeed.

So let's start with Britney. Justin and Britney dated from 1999 to 2002, and they were one of those celebrity couples that everyone talks about.

**Scaachi Koul:**

They had a kind of sudden, sad breakup, and it happened right around the time that Justin was going solo. So in his first solo album, *Justified*, there were a lot of themes in there about a cheating ex-girlfriend and about betrayal. And then when he released the music video for "Cry Me a River," he used basically a body double of

Britney. And the whole narrative of that song and of that video is that she cheated on him.

It was especially egregious because both of them were, sort of, of the purity ring generation that was like, “We’re going to stay virgins until we’re married. It’s important to us that we keep our virginity because of God and our families.” Both of them were raised in the South. A lot of hometown values happening there. And so the narrative is that Britney not only cheats on Justin, but she doesn’t keep her vow to God.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Basically, Justin slut-shamed Britney. A lot. And not just by hinting that she might have cheated on him. He also started claiming that, even though they’d both pledged to remain virgins until marriage, he’d had sex with her. In an interview with Barbara Walters, he offered up a snide “Sure” when asked if Britney had stayed chaste.

**Scaachi Koul:**

I loved them both and felt so conflicted. I felt betrayed. I was like, “How could you? You guys were supposed to get married!”

**Siona Peterous:**

And it wasn’t just that Britney and Justin had a bad breakup. Justin just would not let it go.

**Scaachi Koul:**

For years, he made jokes about her, and for years he made jokes about her possibly cheating on him. It was endless. Everybody stopped thinking of her as a person and she just became a representation of, like, moral rot.

And the narrative that Justin built about her and around her is part of why that happened. That’s not... those are not distinct events.

**Siona Peterous:**

And then there was Janet Jackson. In 2004, she was a headliner at the Super Bowl halftime show and her surprise guest was none other than Justin Timberlake. And at first, it was all good. Until it suddenly wasn’t.

At the very end of their performance, Justin reached across Janet’s chest, grabbed her top, pulled it, and exposed her breast to an audience of over 100 million people.

**Scaachi Koul:**

Her whole boob’s out.

*[CBS News Anchor: Today, there were apologies. A government investigation. And as Lee Cowan reports, a whole new phrase, 'wardrobe malfunction'.]*

It yielded, I think, the most FCC complaints they've ever received.

*[TV Host: It's been parodied, cartooned, and somewhere there's a "Save Janet" t-shirt being made with half a shirt missing.]*

Everybody was sued. Everybody lost their mind over a tit.

*[TV Host: Hey, Janet. Be honest. Take responsibility for your actions. Just say, "I'm a trollop. I need attention. Buy my new album." That's all you have to say.]*

### **Siona Peterous:**

There was a lot of debate over what actually happened and who was at fault. The official comments are that it was a wardrobe malfunction and that Justin was supposed to only rip off part of Janet's top to reveal her bra. Other people wondered if Justin intentionally ripped Janet's bra. Either way, only one of them suffered any real consequences.

### **Scaachi Koul:**

Janet's career took a huge hit. She had a record coming out around that time, *Damita Jo*, which tanked. She was blacklisted quite formally, and she disappeared for a while. And Justin was fine, and nothing ever happened to him, and he was good for the rest of his life.

It was really easy for him to hide behind, "Well, I didn't do it. I'm just a little boy." Like, "I'm just a little boy from Tennessee." I think he could also hide behind race. Janet's a Black woman, and I think he could, sort of, allow other people to create a narrative of her, of this, like... You know, a lot of white people are really afraid of Black sexuality, and so this, like, "Oh, the scary Black lady has shown me her boob." He hid behind it. And for him, it's really... These are crimes of complacency.

### **Lux Alptraum:**

Which brings us to 2021. For a few years now, there have been people whispering about how Justin should probably apologize to Britney and Janet. But then Hulu aired *Framing Britney Spears*, a documentary which reevaluates Britney's career and the way she's been treated by the paparazzi and the media over the years. And suddenly, those whispers became a roar. After *Framing Britney Spears* came out, a lot of people who hadn't thought deeply about how Justin's actions had hurt these women were seeing him in a new light.

**Scaachi Koul:**

I don't know if you, like, looked at his Instagram comments, but around the time that the doc came out, it's just people being like, "How dare you?"

**Lux Alptraum:**

At that point, Scaachi knew an apology was coming. There was too much pressure on Justin. Saying nothing was never a real option.

**Scaachi Koul:**

It was really a question of, like, is it going to be a Notes app on Twitter? Is it going to be a Notes app on Instagram? Is it going to be, like, a glossy *People* magazine spread? What is it going to look like?

**Lux Alptraum:**

And on February 12, we got the answer. A Notes app screenshot posted to Instagram.

**Siona Peterous:**

So, it's been 17 years since Justin and Janet performed at the Super Bowl and nearly 20 years since he broke up with Britney. What did he have to say for himself after all that time?

*[I've seen the messages, tags, comments, and concerns and I want to respond. I am deeply sorry for the times in my life where my actions contributed to the problem, where I spoke out of turn, or did not speak up for what was right. I understand that I fell short in these moments and in many others and benefited from a system that condones misogyny and racism.]*

**Siona Peterous:**

He goes on to say that he specifically apologizes to both Britney Spears and Janet Jackson, and then talks a bit about how he's benefited from a system that privileges white men above everyone else.

**Lux Alptraum:**

He says the apology is just a first step, and that he wants to be held accountable. And then he finishes the apology with a pledge.

*[I can do better and I will do better.]*

**Scaachi Koul:**

Is this an apology? Yeah, technically it has the words in it.

The real question is, what value would an apology hold at this point? What value is there in an apology that comes because you've been shamed into it?

*[music changes; provocative, electronic]*

**Lux Alptraum:**

And it's this point — this question of whether Justin's apology actually has value — that sparked some disagreement between Siona and me.

Like, okay: when I imagine getting an apology like this, it feels so cathartic. Like, I can just viscerally feel it.

**Siona Peterous:**

Yeah, I don't feel that at all.

**Lux Alptraum:**

I mean, obviously I don't know what it's like to be Britney or Janet, but I do know what it's like to be publicly humiliated by someone likable and popular. And I've never gotten an apology from anyone who did that to me — and I really want one.

**Siona Peterous:**

I understand where you're coming from 'cause I've also been in situations where I know I'm definitely owed an apology because someone did something really terrible to me. But waiting or wanting that apology means I have to rely on someone else to confirm my worth. Or I have to wait for them to get on board so I can create the change I want to see happen. And that just ain't it.

**Lux Alptraum:**

I guess I just feel like public recognition *isn't* the end-all, be-all, but it is *something*. And given all the things that Justin could have chosen to say — or not say — I think he did a pretty good job. Sure, it's just a first step. But you need to take a first step in order to get anywhere.

**Siona Peterous:**

Right, and I think a lot of people agree with that. But to me, an apology is not the first step towards change. It's usually the result of a lot of other previous steps.

Like, an apology is basically just a construction sign. It's bright, it's flashy, it gets your attention, but it's also a promise that something is gonna change. And that change won't really be known until way after the fact. And the people who actually got the city to do the construction never get any credit. All the people who pushed the culture and Justin specifically to get this apology are the people who matter to me.

**Lux Alptraum:**

But, look, Siona and I are just two people with some thoughts about apologies.

We're not apology experts or anything. So we found someone who is and asked him what he thought.

**Dr. Nick Smith:**

This is kind of the apology you would expect. You know, it's almost like if there was a JT Apology Algorithm, that's what it would puke out. Like, "Yeah, this makes sense."

**Lux Alptraum:**

That's Dr. Nick Smith, the chair of the University of New Hampshire Department of Philosophy. And he thinks *a lot* about apologies. He's even written two books about them: *I Was Wrong* and *Justice through Apologies*. And he thinks that Justin's apology is a bit of a mixed bag.

**Nick Smith:**

As a curated statement, I think it's a pretty good one. It sets a contrite tone. It wants to be part of the conversation. It speaks about structural racism and sexism. It's also not so specific or self-damning, to actually be damaging, right? Like, he's not admitting anything that we don't already know.

**Siona Peterous:**

But he also thinks that the way that Justin chose to apologize has some glaring problems.

**Nick Smith:**

It's obviously just ridiculous that he's sort of piling in two very complicated transgressions, both against Britney Spears and Janet Jackson — two quite complex issues that deserve, like, their own moments and more — into a social media post. "Let me dispatch both of these issues in one post." That's just, like, "Wow."

**Scaachi Koul:**

I think it's a net neutral because I think the functionality of the statement is for him to not have to deal with it anymore. So what's different?

*[thoughtful electronic music continues in background]*

**Lux Alptraum:**

'Neutral' isn't a term most of us associate with apologies. But maybe it should be.

**Nick Smith:**

If you look at the whole history of this stuff, it goes a lot of different directions and they're not all good.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Apologies often get talked about in a binary way: either they're good and everything is forgiven, or they're bad and that person is canceled. But Nick thinks that way of thinking about apologies is way too simple.

**Nick Smith:**

I often compare thinking about apologies to thinking about love. Love is very complicated, right? And there's many facets to it, and there's thousands of years of philosophy about love, and it's a weird word that means a million different things. But it's also, like, people will die for it.

And love is very complicated. Apologies are the same thing. It's complicated. And just like love, you hope people are careful and understand the nuances.

**Siona Peterous:**

Just like love, apologies are messy, they can hurt people. Sometimes that happens because someone is apologizing thoughtlessly.

**Nick Smith:**

This often happens in the context of something like Alcoholics Anonymous, where you're supposed to make amends to people you've harmed in the past. And you want to be careful with that because, you know, if you're cold calling people you've caused trauma in the past, that may be good for you, but could cause quite a bit of harm to the victim.

**Siona Peterous:**

Other times, apologies intentionally hurt people because someone wants to abuse their power and exploit others.

**Nick Smith:**

This is classic in various kinds of abusive relationships, where someone commits a harm against someone, and then they offer a kind of apology that will keep the person and, you know, sort of win them back in some capacity, and regain their trust, and manipulate them. And then the next offense is often even more grave. And then we go through this downward spiral.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And the optimistic, pro-apology outlook of people like me can actually add to this problem.

**Nick Smith:**

One of the natural habitats of an apology is when something bad and maybe very traumatic has happened. And people want to believe that the apology can make things right, can make things better, can ease the pain. And there's a hopefulness to

that. And that's one of the reasons why they're so dangerous, is because people want them so bad.

**Lux Alptraum:**

But part of why people want them so bad is because, when they're done right, apologies really can be magical. They *can* fix things. They *can* make you feel better. I mean, that's *why* I'm obsessed with apologies in the first place.

And Nick sees that side of apologies, too. Part of why he's spent so much time thinking and writing about apologies is because he wants people to have a better understanding of how they work.

**Nick Smith:**

Because if you can give apologies and do it well, you're pretty far towards, maybe, being a good person, and having good relationships and, like, a good life.

**Siona Peterous:**

And that's why Nick really wants us to get rid of this whole 'good or bad', 'accepted or rejected' framework. Apologies are very nuanced and messy, and this binary hurts us more than it helps us.

**Lux Alptraum:**

Apologies are complicated enough when they're privately given by one person to another. But public apologies? They're a whole other beast.

Because once an apology is *public*, there are a lot more things to consider. It's not just about your victim anymore. You have to think about how everyone who sees the apology will react — including people who didn't even know you'd messed up in the first place. You have to think about how apologizing will "affect your brand." Because a public apology isn't just about making amends, it's about how the *world* sees you. And that's a much trickier path to navigate.

Given how complicated public apologies are, and how ubiquitous they've become in this era of social media and a 24-hour news cycle, it's not really a surprise that Siona and I tend to disagree about them.

**Siona Peterous:**

But one thing we do agree on is that we want to understand them better.

So this season, we're taking a look at a whole range of apologies: ones that worked better than anyone could have imagined, the ones that failed spectacularly, and the ones that landed somewhere in between. We'll try to figure out what makes an apology really matter and the impact they have in our societies and daily lives.

**Lux Alptraum:**

And maybe, just maybe, we'll help you develop a deeper appreciation for a really good apology and a better sense of what role apologies play in your own life. Apologies *aren't* easy, but they are fascinating. And with the help of Nick and a whole team of experts, we're going to take a deep dive into what makes public apologies tick.

**Nick Smith:**

Oh, man. Where do we start digging?

*[outro music; uptempo electronic percussion with guitar]*

*Say You're Sorry* was created by me, Lux Alptraum. I want to apologize for not devoting enough time to my cat. (Sorry, Shoko!)

This episode was written and hosted by Lux Alptraum and Siona Peterous, and produced by Julia Llinas Goodman. Editing by Candace Manriquez Wrenn. Sound design and mixing by Ariana Martinez. Our intro music is by Michael Aquino. Episode art Augusto Zambonato. Special thanks to Jack TP and Michael Schwartz at GoodPeeples Studios. Justin Timberlake's apology was read by Keith Houston.

*Say You're Sorry* is a production of Bucket of Eels. Rose Eveleth is our executive producer. Lara Blackman is our executive producer for Audible.