

**Song Exploder**  
**Kae Tempest – Move**  
**Episode 238**

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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

Just a quick note before you listen, this episode contains explicit language and frank discussion of mental health.

*("Move" by KAE TEMPEST)*

Hrishikesh: Kae Tempest is a songwriter, rapper, an award-winning poet, and best-selling novelist. They've been nominated for the UK's Mercury Prize and Brit Award. Their most recent album is *The Line is a Curve*, which came out earlier this year. It was executive produced by legendary producer Rick Rubin. Kae made the album alongside their longtime collaborator, producer Dan Carey. I talked to Kae and Dan talk about the song "Move." You'll hear the first demo they made, which sounds basically nothing like the final version. In this episode, they talk about how it evolved over several sessions, months apart. Kae's own life changed a lot during that period. They came out as trans and non-binary in 2020, and this song, in part, helps tell the story of what they were going through.

*("Move" by KAE TEMPEST)*

*(Music ends)*

Kae: My name's Kae Tempest. December 2019 — it was the culmination of, well a lifetime of being trans and a lifetime of repressing and being confused, but a really severe like three or four years. But this was the crisis point because I could not hold it down anymore, and I had been having these like constant panic attacks; I've been having them on stage.

I didn't know at this point that I was about to come out publicly a couple of months later. I didn't know that was gonna happen, but I was like fully in the kind of riptide of it.

So this song "Move" is about that, it's about these panic attacks, feeling like completely out of control; suddenly finding your body just doing these things that you just, you don't recognize.

So I decided to fight my depression and the episodes of panic with the biggest force for good in my life, which is creativity.

Dan: My name's Dan Carey.

Kae: So whenever I'm in the studio with Dan it's like the safest place for my creativity.

I feel completely protected from the outside world. You know it's like, this cocoon space where I can be totally absorbed. Knowing that I've got a day in the studio with Dan, knowing this day was coming, it was like, "okay just get to the studio. Just get into that chair in Dan's studio and, it will be transformed, it will come out."

*(Drum machine toms)*

Dan: The first thing we did is just make, make something that sounds like *(Dan mimics drum sound)*.

Kae: That day, when we sat down to write "Move," I was in a kind of stagnant, heavy place. I wanted to shake it off. I wanted a heavy beat because I wanted to write a heavy lyric.

*(Drum machine layering)*

Dan: Kae will give some acknowledgement that it's going down the, the right route. I can just tell when they're feeling it. I can hear you kind of muttering to yourself. Then that helps me know, without any words being exchanged, I kind of know if I'm barking up the wrong tree or not.

*(Beat fades out)*

Kae: I met Dan I think it's probably 10 years ago. And I saw his studio, and I was just like, I'd never seen anything like it. One day I, I just phoned him up and said, "Hey like do you wanna make a beat?" I don't know how I knew; I just knew that this person was somebody that I had to be around. I just felt like I had to be around Dan's creativity.

We went drums, and then the kind of organ sound.

Dan: Yeah, I think the organ thing that, the Moog sound.

*(organ)*

Dan: And then when we start writing we tend to, we kind of go into our own worlds. I had this image of like the woman just facing the firing squad and just smiling

*(Organ + drums + rap vocals: "You are what you hate after all / But standing there facing the wall / With the firing squad awaiting the call / Her last thought was "Fuck these guys" / Then she fell with laughing eyes")*

Kae: Sometimes I'll describe something to Dan, I'll say, "oh hey can you play something on the guitar that sounds like that image that I was seeing, where this character, in the face of certain defeat, feeling like this this resolution or this hope or this like smile regardless. Dan will just pick up his guitar or go the piano, and just using this description that I've given him, he just finds his way to a melody.

(guitar)

Kae: The way I am as a writer and the way I am with this particular song is it's often takes me to just get the first thing out of the way so I can be like, "right, okay I've got all the cliché out of my system." You know like in that first draft, there's rubbish, but I like the hook.

*(1<sup>st</sup> demo plays + rap vocals: "Move / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you till I win / I might do none of it / Or everything")*

Kae: "Move, I'll fight you till I win." I thought that was strong but then I, I didn't need, "I might do none of it everything," I just needed that first line.

And then lots of time goes past before we get another session. The next time we get together, we listen back and we're like, "I really loved the, the kind of looped organ.

I loved how heavy the drums were, they were so heavy and kind of sparse.

*(1<sup>st</sup> demo beat)*

Kae: And then I just decided that I didn't like any of the lyrics. It was just like, "no this isn't right. It's all really vague, it's not direct enough."

And then-

Dan: Then what happened is the pandemic happened.

Kae: Yeah.

Dan: And we, we ended up in such a weird state.

Kae: Where me and Dan had to sit two meters away from each other. it was like summertime, so it was hot.

Dan: And I think we weren't allowed to use the air conditioning.

Kae: Weren't allowed to use the air conditioning! *(laughs)* So this was the lockdown session.

Dan: Yeah. We really went in on the song and we did these Rhodes parts.

*(2<sup>nd</sup> demo plays with new keys)*

Kae: I dug down into the lyric.

*(Rap Vocals play: "Pick your battles / Obsessional ticks, bouncing off the bricks / It is what it is / Everything slips / Sure you're gonna get it 'til you miss")*

Kae: We were really into it. We followed it for ages but sometimes we follow this thing, we, we think we're going somewhere really interesting, but it's not quite right, and then the Eureka moment comes.

Dan: It's when, "This is shit!" *(Both Dan and Kae laugh)*

*(Music spins out abruptly)*

Dan: We just scrapped all of the music.

Kae: Yeah.

Dan: and then got the Swarmatron and just played that (Dan mimics Swarmatron beat)

*(Swarmatron plays)*

Dan: The Swarmatron is an eight-oscillator mono synth with a control that lets you manually adjust the eight oscillators. You constantly move the swarm control, which makes all the, no two notes are the same.

Kae: I think it's like a signature sound and something I really associate with me and Dan just being like totally on fire. So if we're struggling with this particular song, we're struggling with, with "Move" and it's like, "well what the, what does the Swarmatron have to say about this? Why don't we just fuck all this off turn the Swarm on? And then that's what happened.

*(Swarmatron with beat)*

Kae: As soon as I heard that beat, it just electrified me. I was just like, "oh yeah! This is it! This is it! This is it! This is it!" With the previous iterations of the song we've been like, "this is interesting! This is cool!" But we hadn't been like "this is it." And

I think before it was lacking some energy it was like a little bit vague in the lyric and maybe a little bit general in the beat.

Dan: In the first version, it sounds like a fight that you're losing.

Kae: *(laughs)* Yeah!

Dan: And this one it sounds like a fight that you're winning.

Kae: Yeah.

*(Hook with Swarmatron beat, rap vocals: "So move / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you till I win / Move, move / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win")*

(Music stops)

Kae: So we started with, a completely different lyric and a completely different beat. The next thing: we had a different lyric, the right lyric, but a different beat. Then we had a new beat, new lyric, but it's the same song.

And then at that point it's like, "right, okay, now I'm ready to perform this."

Dan: The whole record's put together in a way that you wouldn't imagine. So we, finished all the songs, and mixed them all, laid them out into one long session, muted the vocals, hired a theater, got an audience, got a mic, and Kae performed the whole thing three times.

Kae: I wanted to speak to one person. Building on some stuff that I learned with Rick Rubin about what happens to the vocal when somebody is in the room to listen to it. Like how I rise to the occasion.

And then I took that thought further and I thought, I want it to be three different generations; so that's what we did.

*(a cappella rapping: "Reduced to repetitive myths / Pound for pound with a devil who kicks / Can't stop swinging but it never connects / I throw my whole body into nothing but mist")*

Kae: We did it first for the generation above me: a friend's father who was 78 at the time. And then it was person of my generation, a poet from my neighborhood, from South London. And then it was three people of the generation below. I thought it was better to have three of them because I thought it was a very intense thing to just do to one 14-year-old kid, you know?

Yeah, and so I just did the whole record, and they listened, and I spoke to them.

*(Rap vocals with beat: "Eager to please / Help, help / Going under, telling myself / I won't settle for anything less than the best / I can wrestle out of this tenuous vessel")*

Kae: It was a really strange experience. By the point we got to this recording, Dan's heard these lyrics hundreds of times. We get to the point where it's time for me to do these vocals, and Dan said, "I've never heard you mean it like that. I've never heard the lyric mean what it meant when you were speaking it on the second take to my friend, Bridget Minamore, the poet and friend of mine.

So we used the entirety of the second take.

Dan: I imagine that Bridget would've given you, even subconsciously, just given you a bit more feedback that you might have recognized.

Kae: I remember "Move" coming on and knowing it was gonna bang. I knew Bridget was gonna love this song.

So I just jumped on it.

*(Rapping with beat, rap vocals: "Face like a plate of raw meat / Screaming I can't be beat / Half dead, ready to drop / Truth is I just wanted it all to stop")*

Kae: I was repressing a hell of a lot, I hadn't come out, and I was like suffering because of it I wasn't doing anything about it. It was like just, yeah, this state of repression.

*(Rapping with beat, rap vocals: "Jumping at shadows / Sketchy smiling like nothing upsets me / It's upsetting, I drown it in silence / Fence myself in until nobody answers / Clutching the carpet and praying / The tears like a storm breaking over a desolate plain / I was waiting for the moment when everything changed / But it never came")*

Kae: I really like the line "smiling like nothing upsets me / It's upsetting." Originally it had been, "smiling like nothing affects me / It's upsetting." And then I changed it to that. I feel like it says a lot about what it's like to be hiding and repressing.

*(Hook with lead and background vocals: "Move / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you till I win")*

Kae: I knew that I wanted these male vocals. I wanted these backing vocals, low voices underneath it.

*(Background vocals: "move / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you 'till I win / I'll fight you till I win")*

Kae: So that's Grian Chatten from group called Fontaines D.C., and Confucius MC.

Grian has got one of my favorite voices of anybody making right now. And then Confucius MC is somebody began rapping with when I was a teenager, 16. And so it's really beautiful that he's on the record.

*(Rapping with beat, vocals: "I've seen the monster / Came out from under the bridge / Even that didn't stop me / Long as I live, I will flounder / Buckle and doubt / But I'll go round for round 'til the rounds run out / When it's all too late and the rain in the graveyard / Plant my tree looking out over London / So many things that never came good / But I did what I could")*

Kae: I'm thinking about death and the end, and "plant my tree looking out over London," you know this place that I love. This place that I got so much from. So many things that never became good, but I did what I could.

I'd like that to be a galvanizing thing, something that I could offer. And when it's all said and done, I'd like to be remembered as somebody who fucking tried, you know?

*(Synths)*

Kae: I feel like hope is just the most antagonistic and like violent concept. You know, sometimes I hate the thought of it. It feels so untrue and unreal, and it seems so far away from the reality of what it's like to persevere. One thing that you can say about us is that we keep going. We do persevere and the more that you've borne the more, that you will bear. And I find the idea of persevering, of continuing, I find that really comforting.

*(Synths end)*

Kae: At the time of writing this song I was in a state of real melancholy. And I didn't have much power, before I had been able to say out loud, "look, I'm non-binary. I'm actually trans." But then even just saying these words, you know, it's like a manifestation: "I'll fight you till I win."

And I gained a power, I gained the strength to pick myself up and keep going.

It's been a big thing. It's a massive thing and it's like, it's like coming home. It's like coming home you know?

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like you're still in that fight, "I'll fight you till I win"? Do you, or do you feel like you won?

Kae: No, no, no. I haven't won, no, no, no. There's no winning. You just keep going. *(laughs)* There's no, there is no winning, but you keep fighting, you know? that's how I feel right now.

I dunno maybe with time, I'll see something differently, but right now it's like the fight is the point.

*(Music end)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Move" by Kae Tempest, in its entirety.

*("Move" by KAE TEMPEST)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to stream or download this track. Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were created by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music

clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram, @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt).

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

© 2020 Translucence