

Song Exploder
King Princess - Let Us Die
Episode 241

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

King Princess is the project of Mikaela Straus, a singer, songwriter, and producer from Brooklyn. She's a platinum-selling artist, and she put out her second album in July, 2022. The last track on the album is the song "Let Us Die." Rolling Stone called it "the banger of the year."

In this episode, Mikaela takes the song apart, along with two of her collaborators: co-producer and co-writer, Ethan Gruska, and multi-Grammy winning producer, Mark Ronson. You'll hear the original voice memo that Mikaela recorded, and the demo she made with Ethan. And you'll hear the drums recorded by the late Taylor Hawkins, the legendary drummer of the Foo Fighters and Alanis Morissette, who passed away earlier this year.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Vocals: "If the only way to love you is to let us die / Drive the car right off the cliff and let us dive / And it's not to say that I wanna live without you / But I will if I have to")

King Princess: I'm King Princess.

I was in upstate New York, in this house that's really important to me and my family, by this lake that I go to.

I was super depressed and upset and going through some relationship stuff.

You know, my girlfriend and I were going through this period of like, she was like, *Am I happy being with you and your constant need to be seen by everyone, including me?*

And I was like, *Well, please don't leave me. (laughs) like, you know.*

That was like, one of the most adult conversations I've ever had, was to like, really look at myself and be like, *Am I hurting this person that I love by being me? And is she hurting me by being her?* That's what I wanted to get through, in this song.

I was actually out on the lake, in the rain, and I started singing the melody.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Voice memo: "If the only way to love you is to let us die...")

That's while I was getting off the boat, walking up to the house. That's why I sound a little winded (*chuckles*).

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Voice memo: "Is the only way to love you to let us die?")

So that's how it started, was just the chorus melody in my head

Ethan: My name is Ethan Gruska, and I co-produced, and co-wrote, "Let us Die" with King Princess.

The first day we ever got together was for this song.

KP: I had a good feeling about Ethan, and then I was like, I wanna show you this idea.

Ethan: Mikaela walked in with this fully formed chorus. And originally you played me the idea, I think on piano.

KP: But yeah, no, this had to be a big rock song.

EG: And so we grabbed this instrument that I have, that my friend Reuben made. It's like an acoustic tenor guitar that he retrofitted to be a bass, with something called a rubber bridge.

And it creates this tone like, somewhere in between a guitar and a bass.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(guitars)

KP: It's very round and it's very hungover and sluggish sounding.

Ethan: We were just looking for something, like, kind of raw, and, like, having a different kind of energy, and so I remember just showing you that instrument and, yeah, you just kind of immediately ran with it, started playing, and that was kind of an initial spark.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(guitars)

KP: And so, I kind of put my head down and just started writing.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Demo vocals: "I knew this would happen / You're angry and you're captured / And I feel the rapture / Oh, I'm not your captor")

KP: So I wanted the rhyme scheme to be cyclical.

This kind of word puzzle of rhymes that I felt was indicative of what my brain was doing, during this period of fighting and contemplating whether this relationship is gonna work.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Vocals: "Well baby, I'm starving / For your heart to soften/ But pain makes me want you / Does that make me awful?")

Ethan: We were always going back and forth with figuring out a way to like, have you be like, really honest and human and like raw, but like, have these stranger, more glitchy tones being inserted into like, an anthemic rock song.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(mellotron)

We were on the Mellotron

(mellotron)

KP: I really wanted a spoken word poem in this song.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Vocals: "Baby, I'll leave us behind if it means that you'll be happy")

I love the feeling that you're on the phone with someone and you're like, throwing down the ultimatum.

The idea, that's something I would end a phone call with, or that would be a voicemail.

Being on the phone, we were doing a lot of phone communication, me and my girl, at that point, so um, it felt right.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Vocals: "And if it means you can't have me, It's fine")

KP: So, we ended up taking this song, as I do with some of my projects, like, Mark kind of comes in towards the back half.

Mark Ronson: My name is Mark Ronson.

KP: He's a producer, he's a songwriter. He's like my mentor.

Mark: She brought me this demo

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Demo vocals: "You're happy on Friday / By Monday you're crying / Like the old you was dying")

And I just loved it. I just needed to hear it again and again.

KP: He was really obsessed with this song, and really obsessed with the finishing of this song. We were listening to this song and he was like, first of all, there needs to be more guitars.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(guitars)

Mark was just like, by the last chorus, it needs to explode into like, just insane, chugging, bar chord symphony.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Bar chord symphony with vocals)

(Vocals: "If the only way to love you is to let us die / And drive the car right off the cliff and let us dive")

The final lyric is: If the only way to love you is to let us die, drive the car right off the bridge and let us dive, and it's not to say that I wanna live without you, but I will, if I have to.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Demo chorus with vocals)

(Vocals: "And it's not to say that I wanna live without you / But I will if I have to")

Mark: And then I just had this idea, I was like, I think that this really just needs a phenomenal drum performance.

KP: He was like, Mikaela, there needs to be a like, a human drummer on this.
What about Taylor Hawkins?

Mark: And, she was like, "Holy shit, do you think he would?"

KP: You know, Taylor played with Alanis and was this phenomenal drummer for so many people, so many songs that we love. A lot of female rock like, lady lady rock, which I love. I thought that was so cool.

And then I obviously love the Foo Fighters. I love them so much.

Mark: And I sent it to him. He really dug the song. He loved her voice. He loved the energy, and the aggression of the lyrics, and that was it.

KP: And I was like, oh wow. I don't think I'm ever gonna forget that day.

Mark: And this was like, November 2020.

KP: It was nighttime. We had worked all day. Taylor was in LA. I was in New York at my dad's and, before he started, Mark, you know, got him on FaceTime, and I was like, "Hey man," I was kind of nervous, honestly.

And he was just so lovely and supportive, and just like, "I love the song. I'm gonna do a bunch of takes."

And the song starts and he starts playing –

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Verse drums)

– and I just burst into tears. I was just like, oh my God, this song just went from a seven to a 50

Mark: She had only ever heard it with the program drums.

And the first time he gets to the chorus and rolls through it, I just saw her, she almost looked like in *The Matrix* when they get punched in the stomach in, like, slow motion.

It's just like (*imitates slow-motion noise*).

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(drums)

KP: And Mark was just, like, dying laughing because I was so emotional, and he was also, I think, emotional.

And then he got to the end of the song, like, the first pass, and it was just like – He just went crazy.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(chorus drums)

Mark: Taylor was just playing these like, walloping takes, and then like, rushing out the booth like, sweaty, on FaceTime like, "What'd you guys think of that?!"

We're like, "What do you mean, 'What do you think?' That was amazing!"

And then he'd be like, "I'll go and do another one."

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(drums)

KP: He just kept playing, you know, and you could, like, feel him, like, smiling, like, if that makes sense, Like he was, he loved it, like he loved playing on it.

And I I think that that was what was the most wonderful — as a young artist, was like, I wanna be like that. I wanna love to play, forever. That, to me, is what I took away the most out of that.

After we tracked the guitars and he tracked his drums, I felt like it was in a really good place, and then it went into the mixing process.

I went in with Shawn Everett, who Ethan and I both adore. He is a mad scientist.

I remember being at my dad's studio, and my dad was there, and we were listening to this song.

My dad is named Oliver Straus, who has been a studio owner for 20 years. My dad's studio is in my childhood home.

And I grew up partially at his house, partially at my mom's, and he was always recording.

You know, we've worked really hard on our relationship. I think it was interesting going into this record because, it was the first time that I, in a really long time, like since I was a kid, that I was like, what's your opinion?

Mark: Her dad is just like, you know, a great engineer and producer and knows all the tricks of the trade.

KP: I said, Dad, you know, I'm, we're having kind of a, an issue with making the chorus hit really hard.

Cuz the verse hits really hard. Like, the minute the drums come in, you feel like, Ooh, that's a moving train and you want the train to go faster in the chorus.

And I was like, Dad, what do you think?

And he was like, Oh, just make the verses mono and the choruses stereo.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Mono drums and guitar)

And Shawn and I both were like, oh shit.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(Stereo chorus)

(Vocals: "If the only way to love you is to let us die /And drive the car right off the cliff and let us dive")

Dad, after that, he got very comfortable by the end being like, "Uh, Shawn? Uhh..."

It was, it was fun, he was cute. And I'm happy we shared that. that. And that note made a huge difference.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(scoring fades to just drums, then out)

Since I was a little kid, I've always written music to try to express my feelings to other people. I'm way less articulate, I feel like, when I'm speaking than I am when I'm writing a song for somebody.

Songs force you to be concise, and I tend to not be that concise.

And so when I put out music or bring music home and show it to people, there'll always be these moments, these kind of hard moments of like, oh, this is how you were feeling.

You gotta express yourself somehow, or else you're gonna be consumed in your shitty feelings all day.

Hrishikesh: In March 2022, the song was done, basically, but it hadn't come out yet. And then, on March 25th, Taylor Hawkins passed away while Foo Fighters were on tour in South America.

KP: I felt devastated. Just the tragedy of losing someone that is such a beacon and a light.

Mark: Yeah. I mean, I didn't even know what to think.

KP: Weeks, or maybe even months later, we broached the discussion of, what is the respectful thing to do, you know? Is the respectful thing to – to not release it?

What I came to was like, it's really the decision of his family if that's something they'd like to be out in the world.

So we asked. You know, we said, *what do you feel about this? I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am, and how – how I do not mean to burden you with this question.*

But, you know they basically were like, *if he loved the song and he wanted to be on it, then it should come out.*

Mark: So we went back to turn the drums up.

I was like, we're turning up every fill, seven DBS.

And I spoke to Dave Grohl because I told him the story, how we turned up all of Taylor's fills.

And he's like, that's exactly how he would've wanted it.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

(drums)

KP: You know, you get to work with people sometimes every once in a blue moon that you're like, wow, like this is, this means something to me as a musician. And he was one of those people. It was brief, but he made me feel like I was legitimate as a musician. And I just am so appreciative, you know.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Let us Die", by King Princess, in its entirety.

("Let Us Die" by KING PRINCESS)

Visit songexploder.net for more information. You can find links to buy or stream "Let Us Die," and you can watch the music video.

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 and Mary Dolan.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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