

**Song Exploder**  
**Noah Kahan - Stick Season**  
**Episode 247**

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.

Noah Kahan is a singer and songwriter from Strafford, Vermont. Last year, in 2022, he released *Stick Season*, his third record. The title track from that record went viral on TikTok when Noah was first writing it, and posting pieces of it. One of those videos has over 10 million plays. And as of this recording, on Spotify, the full song has almost 100 million streams.

For this episode, Noah talked to me about the process of making that song: What led him to first post half a song on TikTok, and what happened after that. You'll hear the raw recordings off of his phone; the different drafts he made as he worked; and you'll hear his bracingly honest appraisal of the winding path he took — in his life, and in his music — to get to where he is now.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "And I love Vermont, but it's the season of the sticks and I / Saw your mom, she forgot that I existed and it's / Half my fault, but I just like to play the victim, I'll drink / Alcohol 'til my friends come home for Christmas, and I'll..." )*

Noah: My name is Noah Kahan.

I graduated high school and I got a record deal when I was a senior, and I had to kind of decide between going to Tulane in New Orleans, or taking this record deal. And, you know, it was a pretty easy choice. I was never a great student; never really applied myself and kind of just, you know, fucked around in school and I didn't think college was gonna be something that was beneficial for me.

And my parents were kind of like, hey, this is so expensive. Like, if you can get a record deal and like, go pursue music, then do it. But, you know, ultimately I was such a fledgling artist and fledgling signing for the company that it wasn't like, an immediate rise to stardom.

It was kind of like, go back to your parents' house, and start writing some songs and building up the portfolio. And I didn't realize that it was going to be such a long process of development. And a lot of that development was spent in Strafford.

So, "Stick Season" kind of goes back almost three years now. Stick season is between autumn and winter, where all the leaves are off the trees. I had been hearing the term my whole life, from older neighbors, and people in New Hampshire, and Vermont where I grew up. Everyone was like, yeah, stick season is the worst.

I would always just kinda get super depressed at that time of year.

I had been trying to write a song with "stick season" in it for a while. I had a song that was called "The Season of the Sticks," uh, that was this really gloomy, interlude-y track that never ended up seeing the light of day. But I was really trying to incorporate, you know, that, that phrase.

So I was in Los Angeles, making my second record, in November of 2020. At the time, I felt like I felt like I was making music that I didn't love, and, um, it was tough making the record and feeling that way. It definitely felt like the last pop-centric record that I was gonna make. My heart has always been, uh, with folk music and storytelling. And so I would go back to my Airbnb, or wake up in my Airbnb in the morning before the session, and try to write little stories about New England, and try to write songs that sounded like the ones I loved growing up. You know, artists like the Counting Crows, and the Avett Brothers, and Paul Simon — guys that told stories and transported you to a different place.

In my life, I was feeling insecure and I was really looking for a way to kind of have a burst of approval that might artificially make me feel better about myself. And so I was like, I'm just gonna write a verse tonight, and I'll put it up on TikTok because I want to feel approval from people. 'Cause it certainly wasn't coming from myself.

So I started writing about being stuck at home, which is something that I'd felt for a long time. I started writing about a person that doesn't wanna stay in one place, but can't leave. And that feeling of separation and kind of somebody leaving you, and knowing you can't do anything about it, and knowing that maybe some of it's your fault.

And I wanted to set it to the metaphor of driving.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "As you promised me that I was more than all the miles combined / You must have had yourself a change of heart like halfway through the drive / Because your voice trailed off exactly as you passed my exit sign / You kept on driving straight and left our future to the right / Now I am stuck between my anger and the blame that I can't face / And memories are something even*

*smoking weed can not replace / And I am terrified of weather, 'cause I see you when it rains / Doc told me to travel, but there's COVID on the planes / So I am fucked, I'm fucked, and I suck / And you suck, and this sucks, fuck."* )

And I captioned it, "I don't wanna keep buying weed from high school kids anymore," which was the perfect caption for a song about feeling like you're stuck in your hometown.

Yeah, I posted it and I was not confident in it at all. Put my phone down for a few minutes, and went and I brushed my teeth, and got into bed and looked at my phone. I was like, man, no one is reacting to this. Like, this does suck and I do suck. Perfect.

I woke up the next morning, and the song had really started to take off on TikTok. And it had like five or six hundred comments, which for me was so much.

And people were like, "Post the full song!" "Post the full song!" And I'm like, oh no, I have not written anything else besides this. And so, I kind of fell into this trap where I had half of a song, and people really liked it. And I knew I needed to write a chorus, which was a little bit daunting.

And, and I thought, you know, this is a folk song. It feels like it needs to be simple, and it doesn't need to be musically all over the place.

So I kind of just started to write over those chords that I used in the verse over again. And, and I remembered that I had a song called "The Season of The Sticks," and I started singing "I love Vermont," and I think I kind of wanted it to sound like a country song, and so I was like "I love Vermont," and I was singing it like, with a twang.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "I love Vermont in the season of the sticks and I / saw your mom, she forgot that I existed, and it's / Half my fault, but I get so narcissistic when I'm / \*mumble singing\* (trails off)" )*

And it somehow made it, like, way easier for me to write. I don't know why, it was like, this is cool. It felt like I was outside of myself for a second. And it was fun, and kind of stupid. And so I was messing around with a ton of different melodies and I think I was trying to do some falsetto flips in there.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "And I'll dream each night of some version of you / Then I'll feel your eyes and I... \*mumble singing\* (trails off)" )*

That's all the same morning. I believe it was October 29th.

You know, I'd gotten to a point where I was, like, struggling so much to write, that I was like, if I have something cool, I need to sit down and finish this, or else I will not come back to it.

And so, I kept kind of digging at it that morning. And I wrote the chorus, and I posted the chorus.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "Doc told me to travel, but there's Covid on the planes / And I love Vermont, but it's the season of the sticks and I / Saw your mom, she forgot that I existed and it's / Half my fault, but I just like to play the victim, I'll drink / Alcohol 'til my friends come home for Christmas, and I'll / Dream each night of some version of you, that I / Might not have, but I did not lose, now you're / Tire tracks and one pair of shoes, and I'm / Split in half, but that'll have to do" )*

And then the chorus really did well on TikTok. People were really into it.

And then it became, like, another added layer of like, oh my gosh, I have to write a second verse.

The second verse took a lot longer to write. I, I didn't finish it in Los Angeles. I had returned to Vermont because it was the holidays. It was, like, Thanksgiving, and I spent like three, four, full days just, like, sitting around, messing around with lyrics.

And yeah, ended up, you know, writing a little bit about my dad.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "So I thought that if I piled something good on all my bad / That I could cancel out the darkness I inherited from dad")*

I have depression and anxiety, which I've dealt with my entire life. And my dad and my mom both did. And my dad particularly struggles with depression.

And a lot of my life, I wasn't dealing with my depression in the right ways. I was trying to just tour through my depression or drink through my depression, or eat through my depression and, you know, piling these things that are supposed to be fun and cool over a really real problem. And it was not working for me.

But I find that, in songs that I grew up listening to, when I was really struggling with a problem that I thought no one else in the world had, I would hear a song lyric that just hit the nail on the head with what I was feeling and it would make me feel understood.

I feel like the amount of help that I got from artists when I was growing up, that if I could provide that for somebody else, then maybe the discomfort of talking about my dad's depression would uh, help somebody.

So the next thing for the life of the song was starting to play it live. Tons of people already knew the words to the song. It was the first tour after Covid, so that "Covid on the planes" line was really exciting for people.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "Doc told me to travel, but there's Covid on the planes / And I love Vermont, but it's the season of the sticks and I / (fades out)")*

What was funny about Stick Season was how easy it came in the beginning and, and how difficult it ended up being to see it through to the end.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

My manager manages a producer named Gabe Simon. And so I went down to Nashville to work with Gabe. And we spent a couple hours kind of just hanging out and talking, and I felt super comfortable. And I was realizing that the success the song had, was from this very nonchalant Airbnb TikTok.

And I was like, let's just kind of try to make it feel like that; fun and energetic, but not too self-serious.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*\*guitars\**

The first thing we recorded at Gabe's, we did like a vocal and guitar to a click, just to kind of get a scratch down. And it actually felt really good.

So then the next thing we did was, we tried a couple different guitars.

*\*guitars\**

And Gabe used the pick guard to kind of create the rhythm and sound almost like a kick drum, which was a really cool touch.

*\*guitars, banjo\**

That's Gabe Simon playing the banjo on the record. He professes that he is not a banjo player, but I thought he played it quite nicely.

*\*banjo\**

It just felt like home to me, in a lot of ways. Like, when I was growing up, my mom played the banjo.

And when I lived in Hanover, we lived right across the road from the Appalachian Trail, and we would hike it all the time, you know. I felt like incorporating that was kind of an ode to Appalachia, in a lot of ways.

One of my favorite lines I've ever made was "Drinking alcohol 'til my friends come home for Christmas," just 'cause it's just such a, it's so true to, it was so true to my experience living in Strafford when all my friends were gone.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "But I just like to play the victim, I'll drink / Alcohol 'til my friends come home for Christmas")*

I would just kind of count the days down until December 20th when my buddies would get back from college. And those days when my friends came home felt like I was kind of back to a normal life, which was, uh, really valuable to me at the time.

And so we did a bunch of gang vocals at the end, 'cause I wanted it to be like all my friends were back home singing the last chorus with me. It was Gabe and Konrad and I, yelling and shouting. Konrad Snyder, who, uh, engineered it.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals: "Half my fault, but I just like to play the victim / I'll drink alcohol, 'til my friends come home for Christmas, and I'll / Dream each night of some version of you / That I (fades out)")*

And so we sent in a draft to the management. They were like, this is really cool, but I think it might be a little corny. Just like, huge gang vocal at the end of this kind of more stripped-back, intimate song. And we were like, eh, I think you might be right.

And then I went down the rabbit hole of production, trying new things and re-recording vocals, but it was definitely a slog and a grind.

After the second verse hits, I wanted to give it another lift with some harmonies.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocal harmonies: "...dream each night of some version of you" )*

I am the biggest fan of, like, a beautiful harmony. Like, right when it clicks into the melody, like, it just feels so satisfying.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*( "...might not have, but I did not lose" )*

The ending definitely feels, to me, like a reunion with the friends coming home from Christmas. The people being back, and that feeling of being alone not being there so much anymore.

And I think that's what I really wanted to accomplish with the gang vocals of like, "I'm not alone anymore!" But I think there was a more nuanced way to do it.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

*(Vocals with harmonies: "Tire tracks and one pair of shoes / And I'm split in half, but that'll have to do / Have to do, ooh")*

By the time the song was finished, it was cool to kind of have that full-circle moment of, you know, going from a place where I was feeling very burnt-out creatively, to having my most successful song be one that I just wrote cuz it was funny, and made me happy, and I was bored at my Airbnb.

I've come to the realization that no amount of success, and no amount of creative fulfillment, will ever make me a complete, or fully happy, person. I, I think it used to be, if I can just get in the room with this person or if I can get this many streams, or play this venue, then I'll be happy.

Unfortunately, that's not really how it works. And I, I've had to do a lot of work in therapy and just in my life, trying to find out what makes me happy and how to find fulfillment.

I think what was really cool about the whole process was that seeing people react to Stick Season in that way reaffirmed my belief in what creativity means, and what a job in the music industry can look like.

Hrishikesh: How about your feelings about stick season; has that changed at all? Like, do you like that time of year better, now that it's responsible for this big hit of yours?

Noah: I still absolutely hate stick season in Vermont. It's miserable. There's just nothing redeeming about it. It's so gray and cold. Everyone in my family gets, like, super depressed and then we're all, like, grumpy and annoying to be around.

So, no, absolutely not. I could write a million songs about stick season; I would still hate it. (*chuckles*)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Stick Season" by Noah Kahan, in its entirety.

*("Stick Season" by NOAH KAHAN)*

For more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "Stick Season," and you can watch the music video. I've also linked to the original TikTok videos that Noah made when he was first writing.

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music and logo were created by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.