

Song Exploder
Kenny Beats - Still
Episode 249

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

Kenny Beats is a hip-hop producer who's been producing songs and making beats for other artists since 2010. He's got a long list of collaborations, with rappers like Vince Staples, Freddie Gibbs, and Denzel Curry. But in 2022, he did something he wasn't really ever expecting to do, which was to release an album of his own. The album is called Louie, and it's a tribute to his father. I talked to Kenny about the song "Still," the first song he made specifically for this project. It features guest vocals from JPEGMafia and Omar Apollo, and a sample from gospel singer Linda Kemp. Louie includes a lot of tracks where you can hear Kenny's dad's voice, and even though "Still" isn't one of them, as Kenny explains, his relationship with his dad is deeply embedded in the song's DNA.

Kenny: My name is Kenny Beats.

It was early 2021.

I was in Bath, England, recording a band called IDLES. And my dad calls me and tells me he has cancer.

My name is Kenneth Charles Blume III, and my dad's name is Kenneth Charles Blume II.

And we've been through a lot of stuff before sickness was ever a worry. My dad's overdosed twice. Him getting sober, and the journey we've had in our own personal relationship, was more than enough to bear, as it was. So when he called me and told me he has pancreatic cancer, it just felt kind of overwhelming.

But the first thing I did was find all the recordings I could of him and I.

(Archival tape: "And we'll be back here with more music for ya, at The Perch, 103.6"

"6FM!"

"All riiiiiiight. Here we go.")

In the nineties when you'd go over to somebody's house, and you would bring maybe a bottle of wine, or something you'd cooked for a potluck, my dad would bring a cassette. He made these mixtapes. And he would always personalize it and say their name at the start. And he would do this radio announcer voice, "Welcome to 103.6 fm, this is your host, Ken Blume."

And sometimes he'd have me come on and say, "Hi, this is Kenny Jr, da da da da, da."

(Archival tape: Hi, I'm Ken Blume, happy to be here. We're playing one tape with me and my keyboard, and my dad's helping me out. Um, have a happy turkey day.)

"You don't have to put your lips on it, just right about there works, see? You want that coming in right about there. We are 103.6FM."

And it was just such a weird thing, and people got a kick out of it, and I knew he was always more proud of them than he said.

He went to broadcasting school. And his dream was to be on the radio, and it never panned out.

And so he'd make these tapes.

(Archival tape: Alright then, that was my son, Kenneth Blume III, doin' a little bit of improvisational schtick here for us today, at The Perch, on a Father's Day, June 16th, nineteen-hundred and ninety-six.)

He always made the cassettes he made, for that one moment. This tape is only for them, in the whole world, that's why he always did what he did.

And so, I had this idea to make a project, and give it to my dad.

And I was like, I'm a real producer now. What if I could make my dad this realized version of what he used to do? And that was not anything that I ever thought was gonna go to the public at the start, was like, what can I make him?

I started the album December 1st, 2021. I was working on Ramona Park Broke my Heart for Vince Staples at the time, and we had a song that needed a new sample.

So, I was home, and I was kind of just looking through stuff, looking through stuff, looking through stuff. And I was listening to gospel records and samples to try to just get inspired for a chord change.

("I Can't Stop" by LINDA KEMP)

And I heard Linda Kemp.

And then, she started saying, (*sings*) "I really meant it."

("I Can't Stop" by LINDA KEMP)

(Vocals: "I really meant it, yes I meant it all.")

And as it played, instead of thinking about a lover, an ex, something intimate or romantic, I started thinking about my dad.

("I Can't Stop" by LINDA KEMP)

"Oh, I can't stop loving you."

I started thinking about something I was going through with my father, in that month. And as I started to think about some of the samples in some of the music I was listening to, towards a parent I've had a lot of difficult years with, they all flipped their meaning.

"Do you still think of me," when it is about your ex, feels one way.

"Do you still think of me," when it's a parent who might not even call you or check in on you, it hurts from a whole different part of your heart, and whole different part of your stomach.

My dad and I have a very complicated relationship. And I wanted to make him this beautiful thing, but as I was making it, I was thinking about all the horrible stuff I've been through with him, the years I've hated him, what I've dealt with, with having a parent struggle with addiction.

Whenever you, you're lucky enough to be around someone who gets sober, and experience someone that you love sober, it teaches you a lot. And it teaches you that sometimes when someone doesn't tell you the truth, that doesn't mean they are a liar forever. And it teaches you that sometimes when someone steals from you, they're not a thief. It means they're sick.

("I Can't Stop" by LINDA KEMP)

So I take the Linda sample. I start to chop the pieces that feel important to me.

("I Can't Stop" by LINDA KEMP)

(Vocals: "I really meant it, yes I meant it all.")

I started to filter some things and kind of create what felt to me like an intro.

And then I added some drums,

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

I added some bass.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

and I made what felt like a verse section,

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "You, loving you, in love with you.")

I kept having these moments where I was trying to snap myself out of how emotional I was getting. I had this embarrassment of like, feeling like I was about to cry. About chopping a sample and putting some drums on it. Because I'm thinking about my dad.

I'm like, this music isn't cry-worthy yet, but it hurts. I'm doing something that I've done a million times, and I'm not even making what I think is necessarily like this incredible beat, in the first 30 minutes. It's just like what she's saying, on the day she's saying it, when I think about my dad, was really hurting my feelings.

So, I basically wanted to kinda push down some of the tears and be like, Hey, it's a beat.

And all I could hear was Peggy's voice - JPEGMafia.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Uh!")

I could just hear Peggy kind of like rapping about something completely different.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Double up!")

He has an effortlessly weird style and for some reason, I just could only imagine him.

I called him. And Peggy came over, wrote a 16 bar verse, went in the booth. Recorded the whole verse.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "I bought your lil' bitch a starter pack / You talkin' shit? We gon' target that / Double up, whip go back / I feel like facin' the case, uh")

And I cut 12 bars off.

Because I felt like, you know, it's not a rap song.

I put Peggy on it. Like, Peggy is an instrument.

But I feel like what I want people to focus on, lyrically, is what Linda Kemp is saying.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "I really love you, yeah.")

But I needed the instrument of JPEG Mafia to kind of paint the picture so that the Linda stuff rang out the right way.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Double up (You) / Okay, uh (Loving you)")

and then I asked him to just ad-lib the whole track.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Uh, (shake it up) uh, (shake it up) uh, (shake it up) / Still, (shake) still (shake)")

The ad-libs were to create a human element that was continuous.

He coughs and he's laughing and it's just full takes of me just leaving him in there without any editing.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "[laughs, chatter]")

I wanted there to be constant chatter. Just kind of noise.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

"I got my pea coat on [laughs]"

And before he got out of the booth, he was like,

"Oh yeah, you can't play this around no rapper, yo."

And I just put that bit of Peggy, at the end, to kind of just say like, I don't know if anyone's gonna get this...

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Distorted vocals: Yeah, you can't play this around no rapper, yo. 'Cause it's just gonna be, like, it's-it's just, keep this locked the fuck up. Don't say anything to nobod—[beep])

I wanted everything to feel like limbo. Cuz that's how I feel about my dad.

He's my hero and I love him more than anybody in the whole world. He makes me who I am. I wouldn't be here without him.

And I can't believe someone could do things that they've done or act ways that they've acted this and that, or I could even still have a relationship with him after things we've been through.

And so, Peggy laughing sounds maniacal.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

*(Vocals: *laugh to scream*)*

It felt like the devil on one shoulder. So I just knew that I needed the angel on the other shoulder.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "ooh, ooh")

Omar Apollo is a recording artist from Indiana. He is always breathing music. We've been working for years and years and years, and he's become even a closer friend than collaborator.

And I just hit him to hang out. And when we went to the studio, I was playing him the beat.

When Omar heard it, he was just kind of humming and he asked what it was, and I told him, I was like, it's just called "Still." And what it meant is like, do you still love me? Do you still have love for me? Like, do you still even care?

And I don't think I explained it was about a parent, but, but Omar sang just right away, just in the room, just:

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Oh do you still, got love.")

And I was like, can you please just do that 10 times?

I needed the thesis statement to get said somewhere in the song

And he sang the same sentence 20 times:

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

"Oh do you still, got love."

But he would finish it with these fills and ad libs and all types of other stuff.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Oh do you still, got love for me, love for me.")

And I put them all on top of each other

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

"Oh do you still, got love for me, love for me."

I just made this wall of so many Omars.

And there's this bit of me playing guitar underneath.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

Omar makes me wanna cry.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh")

Peggy makes me wanna cry, at a different reason.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Still")

The stuff with my dad makes me want to cry. Linda Kemp makes me want to cry.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "(You) Still / Uh, uh, uh (So in love with you)")

Just getting through this right now is tough.

Like, all of these people give me that feeling, and I want to be able to impart that feeling.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

I moved my dad to live on my same street while we're dealing with doctors and appointments and everything, so I could be as close to him as I could.

So we live right down the street from each other. I see him all the time.

And I was hinting at something I was gonna make him. That it's not just gonna be another, like, gift I'm buying you this Christmas.

And so he knew something was coming. And the only thing I'm good at is music, so he knew something musical was coming. But I don't think he knew the magnitude of, like, this big picture look at everything we've been through together.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh")

The day I finally finished everything I played it for my dad while we were cooking food.

That was the first time he kind of knew what I was saying also, and that I wasn't just saying I love you.

At the end of it, it wasn't just like a big hug and a big smile. Like he looked at me and he was like, I really love it. But I think he knew that, this isn't an "I Love You, Dad" album. 'Cause I was about to tell the world about this.

And if I'm gonna tell the world about this, that means I'm gonna talk about what's going on with us. And that means addiction's part of that. And that means us not speaking for years is part of that. And that means damage he's done, and things he's embarrassed about, are fair play. It's not all sunny.

I mean, it means the world to him. His face is on the cover and stuff, but like he also is someone who's sober now for five years and has dealt with a million things that he wished he could change, you know. This whole thing started out of desperation, and out of this need to put a stamp on our relationship and have something to remember it by. And it's been years now of us fighting this and dealing with it.

But, me and my dad laughing in the kitchen, playing this song.

I think it was one of the greatest moments of our relationship.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

(Vocals: "Ooh, ooh")

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Still," by Kenny Beats, in its entirety.

("Still" by KENNY BEATS)

For more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Still."

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. 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.

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