

**Song Exploder**  
**Kesha - Eat The Acid**  
**Episode 261**

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

This episode contains explicit language.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA)*

Kesha is a singer and songwriter from Los Angeles. She put out her first song in 2009. It was a huge #1 hit in the US and 13 other countries. She's had 10 top-ten singles on the Billboard charts, and sold millions of albums. She got famous for songs that were about partying, and breaking the rules, and having fun. But this year, in May 2023, she put out the album *Gag Order*, which is a lot more raw and vulnerable. She made it with superstar producer Rick Rubin. And, for this episode, I talked to Kesha about her song "Eat The Acid," which she wrote early on in the pandemic. I was really interested in the intense distorted vocal sound that I'd heard in the track; and as you'll hear, it turns out most of that was a byproduct of the way she had to write and record when we were all in lockdown.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA)*

*(Vocals: "You said, "Don't ever eat the acid if / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me" / You said, "All the edges got so jagged now / Everything you saw then can't be unseen" / Last night, I saw it all / Last night, I talked to God")*

Kesha: My name is Kesha.

Hrishikesh: Kesha told me that, from 2008 to 2020, she spent her life as a pop star in kind of a bubble.

Kesha: I was living life moment-to-moment for 12 years.

I didn't really have that much time to pay attention to much else aside from what was directly in front of me for the next 10 minutes, hour, whatever it was. It was just: Okay, we're on the bus; okay, we're on the plane; okay, we're on stage.

It was like, constant escapism in my music. Because I feel like most of my music is centered around going out, celebrating, partying... I think I distracted myself. But there was always a piece of me that... like, I wanted to really feel held. And I really wanted to have faith and trust in something bigger than myself. And this is in a non-religious way.

So, lockdown was the first time I hadn't been touring and working for a really long time. And during June, July, August 2020, I really just started diving into all this contemplation and reading.

And without all that distraction, it actually gave me time and space to pay attention more to injustice, and social inequality. It felt like a cruel awakening.

And there is a part of me that's like, wow, just burying your head in the sand and like not even being aware of this stuff was a lot easier. Because it came with a lot of anxiety, because I'm not sure how to go about fixing or helping it. And that "loss of control" feeling... it just felt so big.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - synths)*

And there was one night, of many, that I just could not sleep. And I was up, just going over and over these existential questions in my mind. And then I had this beautiful moment where I felt like something, or someone, or I don't know what it was, gave me like this intervention of:

Yo. Stop worrying. Stop freaking out. Like you're just endlessly freaking out, and like... chill. I got you.

It was a really beautiful experience, but it was also terrifying because it felt like a psychedelic trip. It felt like I was on drugs. It absolutely felt like I was on drugs.

And then I woke up and I remember calling my two collaborators, Stuart Crichton and my mom, Pebe Sebert.

And I was like, at the expense of maybe sounding totally insane, I think I talked to God last night, and I need to write a song about this experience.

I was saying: I feel like this, like enlightenment; I'm terrified; I'm excited; I feel held by the universe. And then Stuart started playing this guitar-sounding thing.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo guitar-sounding thing)*

He wasn't playing like a guitar. It's a keyboard. But it sounds just like an acoustic guitar. But it felt old school; it felt cool; it felt organic.

I met Stuart during the making of my album *Rainbow*. And he's just like the best. He's like family, at this point.

So it started with those chords and it was over Zoom. Cause it was in the time of writing songs over zoom, which was a nightmare. So I could hear the guitar part, and then I would sing into my phone,

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo with gibberish vocals)*

On the voice memos, I just like sing kind of gibberish (sings gibberish). And I just kind of let it be gibberish until it starts to come together.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo with gibberish vocals)*

I like to start with melodies, because I feel like once you have the melody, then you can really tell the story. And then the words have to complement the melody and then the chorus and title have to give you the anchor and the soul of what the song is.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo with Pebe singing)*

*(Demo vocals: Kesha and Pebe: "You said, da-da-da, eat the acid, 'cause")*

*(Kesha: Wait, sing it one more time?)*

*(Pebe singing: "You said don't ever eat the acid, 'cause / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me")*

*(Kesha and Pebe: "You said...")*

My mom is a songwriter and has been since, like... she's been doin' it her whole life.

And then she wrote a song for Dolly Parton that ended up just being like a surprise big hit song.

Hrishikesh: The song's called "Old Flames Can't Hold a Candle to You."

Kesha: So then she moved to Nashville and started writing country music.

She always kinda told me when I would come home from school, like, crying 'cause I was like "I'm just so different than the other girls at this school!" She would always just say, like, go write a song about it.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - voice memo)*

*(Demo vocals: Kesha and Pebe: "You said, da-da-da, eat the acid, 'cause / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me")*

*(Kesha singing: "You said don't wanna eat the acid 'cause / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me / You said don't wanna eat the acid 'cause / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me")*

My mom was like, in LA in the 80s, playing shows and being, like, a wild woman.

So she told me when I was younger, like, don't ever eat acid. Because you would see things. And you could not unsee them.

There was this tone in her voice that I was like, Oh, she's not fucking around. So when she told me not to take the acid, it felt like a warning. And so I... I believed her.

*(Kesha in demo: "Okay.")*

I've still never taken it!

*(Demo vocals: "You said don't ever eat the acid 'cause / You don't wanna be changed like it changed me / You said the edges got so jagged and / Everything you saw still can't be unseen / Last night I saw it all")*

I just feel like she knows me so well that... you can't bullshit your mom, you know? Like, you can try to be a cool guy, like in front of new people, and you could be this like mysterious babe. But like with your mom, there's none of that. Which, I kind of think that produces some of my best songs.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo)*

*(Stuart demo vocals: \*gibberish lyrics\*)*

*(Kesha: LOVE that. Do it again, do it again.)*

So that's Stuart.

*(Stuart demo vocals: \*gibberish lyrics\*)*

*(Kesha joins in)*

*(Stuart demo vocals: \*gibberish lyrics\*)*

*(Kesha: Yeah. Love that.)*

And he's singing over what became the verse.

For me, most important part of this whole process is doing this with someone that you can just like, say the dumbest shit but you're surrounded by people that love you and aren't judgmental.

When you write like fun, sillier songs, I'm like, Oh, I can put that hat on so quick.

But these emotional ones, I feel very vulnerable. And so, I have to do this process with someone I feel comfy and safe with.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo)*

*(Kesha demo vocals: \*gibberish lyrics\* / Terrified when I close my eyes / \*gibberish lyrics\*)*

And then I started working with Rick Rubin, and he is also fascinated with the spiritual, supernatural, all that stuff. And when we decided to do this album together, Rick said this, and it stuck with me: "A song is a prayer."

And so I played him this song.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - demo)*

*(Demo vocals: "Last night, I saw it all / Last night, I talked to God / (Ahhh-ahh, ahh-ahh) You don't wanna be changed like it changed me / (Ahhh-ahh, ahh-ahh)")*

And then between the two of us, we were like, kind of trying to find the right clothes to put on this song. The only way you know what fits and looks good is if you try it and then you listen back.

So we recorded in Hawaii and in Malibu just trying on different synth sounds, different drum sounds, putting in a guitar, taking out the guitar, letting it breathe more.

Throughout that process, you kind of start to hear what works, and start to hear what doesn't work. And the more of an emotional response I would get, that felt like those were the right clothes.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - drone sound from intro)*

I wanted the song to sound terrifying. Cause let me tell you, when you start having, like, a voice talk to you in the middle of the night, in the middle of an anxiety attack, that's terrifying.

Spirituality can feel scary and dark and weird and intense.

*(“Eat The Acid,” by KESHA - isolated vocals)*

*(Vocals: “Been dodgin’ gods I didn’t want / I’d gotten used to bein’ lost”)*

The final vocals are from the voice memos. It’s me singing into my phone, where you can hear the guitar coming from my laptop, because that day my headphones wouldn’t work.

*(Vocals: “I never felt like I belonged”)*

It was like the jankiest operation in the world. But Rick and I tried to recreate that vocal on so many different microphones, here and in Hawaii, like all over the place. With the most magical, fanciest microphones in the world.

And we just decided, like, none of it had the magic of the moment.

*(Vocals: “You said, “Don’t ever eat the acid if / You don’t wanna be changed like it changed me” / You said, “All the edges got so jagged now / Everything you saw then can’t be unseen” / Last night, I saw it all / Last night, I talked to God” )*

It was really important to me to have a moment where it opens up.

*(Vocals: “I searched for answers all my life / Dead in the dark, I saw a light”)*

There’s a line that I really want to emphasize that was:

*(Vocals: “I am the one that I’ve been fighting the whole time / Hate has no place in the divine” )*

I grew up, I went to Catholic school. And I grew up kind of being like, I don’t know if I’m gay. I don’t know if I’m straight. I don’t know. Like, it was always very ambiguous. But the LGBTQ+ queer community has been my home. So I, I feel very protective over, over the community as well.

That was part of my searching when I was younger is having a hard time going to different churches that would make comments about how homosexuality was evil.

And so, “hate has no place in the divine” — that line, like, ties in with the endless searching, because I wanted to find the spirituality and the answer that felt just totally full of love.

If I'm truly a divine creature, I can't hate myself.

Towards the end of the song, I wanted it to change into hope, and focusing on the future.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - pulsating synths from outro)*

I just really wanted it to sound like almost a nod to my old self with like the four on the floor, pulsating drum beat,

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - pulsating synths from outro, plus kick drum)*

like, turning up the volume of life. I wanted it to sound like it's getting even more intense at the end. Like I just wanted this huge crescendo.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - all stems from outro)*

The irony of it being called "Eat The Acid" is, I've never taken acid, for the very reason of like, I love the ignorant, blissful, unaware kind of stupidity.

I love it. I miss it. But when you start to see things, you can't unsee them. You can't unknow these things. So in a way, it's really beautiful to have all this knowledge, but there is a part of me that is like, Oh my God, I wish I was just like so blissfully unaware still.

Cuz I was like, I feel so crazy and I was like, kind of worried about it. But I have to write a song about this.

And I remember this was cool: My mom saying, You've never sounded more sane.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA - drone sound)*

When I hear that beginning droning synth sound, it reminds me, like, you have this connection that is there.

Even if you're not talking to God every single day and every single night and you're having good days and bad days, like... that happened. And that is there for you. And you are being held by the universe. And it is scary. I just think life is magical and beautiful and exciting and exhilarating and boring and all the things, but it's terrifying.

And so it's nice to hear that synth sound, because it takes me back to that moment in time. It takes me right back to laying on the bed, feeling so excited because I felt like I just had this spiritual awakening.

And I, and I hope it is conveyed through the music because I wanted it to feel, like, spiritual, but dark. And then eventually, by the end of the song, hopeful.

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all these ideas and elements came together in the full song.

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And now, here's "Eat The Acid" by Kesha, in its entirety.

*("Eat The Acid," by KESHA)*

Visit [songexploder.net/kesha](http://songexploder.net/kesha) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Eat The Acid," and you can watch the music video.

If you liked this episode, you might like the Imagine Dragons episode from 2021. It's also about a deeply personal song, and it was also produced by Rick Rubin.

You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the podcast, at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net), or wherever you listen.

This episode was made by me, Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, 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.