

**Song Exploder**  
**Le Tigre - Deceptacon**  
**Episode 282**

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.

Could I just get you to introduce yourself?

Kathleen: Yeah. I'm Kathleen Hanna from the bands Bikini Kill and Le Tigre. I also did a solo record called The Julie Ruin. And I'm really happy to be here.

Hrishikesh: Before we get into Le Tigre, I wanted to ask you about Bikini Kill and The Julie Ruin. I thought it might be helpful to have some context as to how you got to Le Tigre. Because, all three of these projects have, kind of, really different, distinct sounds.

Kathleen: Yeah, 'cause Bikini Kill is kind of a really typical, four-person, punk band.

*("Rebel Girl" by BIKINI KILL)*

*(Vocals: "I taste the revolution / Rebel girl, rebel girl / I know I wanna take you home / I wanna try on your clothes, uh")*

I was the lead singer and we were very associated with, like, feminist punk. And it became, actually, really kind of an albatross, because it was like... just constant criticism. There was a lot of, like:

"You're a sellout 'cause you played with The Go-Go's and it was sponsored by Michelob or whoever, and you are not doing feminism right." And then the constant chorus of "You're a man hater." It got really exhausting, after seven years. And we hadn't really dealt with our relationships with each other, because we were constantly dealing with pressures from the outside world. And the band was kind of not practicing.

And I just wanted to be a person in a band making music. Like, gosh, can't I just write some songs already?

And so, our friend Slim Moon, he loaned me a sampler, and I had gotten a Drumatix drum machine. I used those two things to start recording on my four-track cassette player. And it was very freeing.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE)*

*(Vocals: "Who took the bomp?")*

Hrishikesh: Le Tigre originally formed in 1998. They released their self-titled debut in October 1999. Spin Magazine called it one of the best albums of the past 30 years, and Pitchfork called it one of the best albums of the 90s. I listened to that album a lot

when it came out, and 25 years later, I still hear songs from it everywhere, on TV and in movies, and just out in the world – especially the song “Deceptacon.” For this episode, I talked to Kathleen Hanna and Johanna Fateman from Le Tigre about how they wrote it, and how they put the track together.

*(Vocals: “Who took the bomp from the bompalompalomp? Who took the ram from the ramalamadingdong? / Who took the bomp from the bompalompalomp? Who took the ram from the ramalamadingdong?”)*

*(music fades out)*

Hrishikesh: I was wondering if you could tell me about going from a band in a sort of traditional rock setup to being like, “I’m gonna make stuff with samplers and drum machines”, beyond just wanting to make music on your own, how did you decide that these were the kinds of tools that you would use?

Kathleen: I was really influenced by this guy who put out this record Land of Loops. And also Atari Teenage Riot. They were mixing punk with electronic music in a way that I found really interesting. So, having the drum machine, which my then-boyfriend saw at a record store and was like, this thing’s worth so much money, and it’s only \$40, you have to buy it. And I was like, ok, it was kind of a fluke. And then as soon as I got it, I was like, oh, I put the snare here, the high hat here, you know, I, I just immediately started singing along to it.

*(“Tania” by JULIE RUIN)*

*(Vocals: “I don’t know why / He didn’t do it right / I don’t know why / He didn’t do it right / I don’t know why / I don’t know why / It might be something coming from the inside”)*

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about how you went from The Julie Ruin to Le Tigre? How did other people get involved in your project?

Kathleen: I moved away from Olympia, and eventually I made my way to New York in like 1998. And my friend, really good friend, Johanna Fateman, who had been my roommate for a while many years before, was in New York.

She’s an art critic now, and she writes books. And she’s just like one of the smartest people I know, and she has the best taste and she was messing around with electronic music in her apartment and I was like, oh!

Johanna: My name’s Johanna Fateman. I am a member of the band Le Tigre.

Hrishikesh: I would love to start by asking you what you might remember about the first conversation you had with Kathleen about even starting a band.

Johanna: Well, Kathleen and I were in a band before Le Tigre, when we lived in Portland together. We were in this band called The Troublemakers. So, we had played music together a little bit.

Kathleen: But yeah, it started that we were gonna recreate The Julie Ruin. Because, you know, I did this record, and I wanted to try to tour it.

Johanna: So I was like, yeah, I'll go on tour. We can figure out how to like reverse-engineer those songs to perform them live. And so, I had begun to sample things from the Julie Ruin record. But It was very difficult to reverse engineer the music.

Kathleen: And we were trying to do it, and we just couldn't. And so we started writing new songs.

Johanna: Le Tigre began right after I graduated from art school, and definitely the kind of art I was interested in was conceptual. I was a punk, and into punk music, and I think the way those things dovetailed was that I was not interested in virtuosity of any kind. And I wasn't interested in being good at playing an instrument. So, I think that was cool about our approach to songwriting. It was never about, like, being good at something. It was about having good ideas and being good at thinking things through and, you know, expressing ourselves. And I thought that was punk.

Kathleen: It was so great to have kind of a partner in crime. Both of us did not have a lot of money, you know, we were trying to scrape by in New York. So we used really old, outdated equipment that people just gave us or we found on the street.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me how "Deceptacon" first got started?

Kathleen: So, I was in this apartment by myself and I had, by that time, gotten an eight track reel-to-reel Tascam, with quarter-inch tape. And I'd brought it with me to New York and set it up on a table. And then I had my drum machine and a guitar.

And just laid down like the most simple drum track ever.

*(drum beat)*

And that's how I would kind of work, is, I would, sometimes I'd use just the same drum beat, thinking to replace it later, you know? And just speed it up and slow it down, and just put it on, like, five different songs at once.

Hrishikesh: Almost like it's a more fun version of a metronome.

Kathleen: Exactly. And I would just play guitar until I found something I liked and then play it over and over.

*(drum beat fades out)*

So with "Deceptacon," it was just a simple beat and then like, (sings) "do, do, do-do, do, do, do...."

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - guitar riff)*

That was it. That was the guitar riff. I just sang over that.

I just had all this stuff in my head to get out. And I also had these melodies. And a lot of the lyrics were dummy lyrics, because it was a throwaway song. It wasn't something that I was like, this is great. You know what I mean? It was like, I did, like, four other songs after that. And I was doing it all on the floor. That's the thing I really remember. The apartment had really disgusting carpet.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Kathleen: But I got a practice space with Johanna and we brought the eight track there. And I would play her these beginnings of songs and then she would make comments and notes.

Johanna: And I think that she came to one of our meetings with that song. Not, like, structured and polished and totally finished, but she had the top line melody.

Hrishikesh: What was your first reaction when you heard the thing that she played you?

Johanna: I knew it was great. And I knew it would be the first song on our record.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Johanna: Yeah. It had that, like, kickoff energy that I feel bridged Bikini Kill and Le Tigre. The rage, and sort of the razor-y lyrics.

But with that repetitive, simple guitar line, it felt more Le Tigre.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - guitar riff)*

Kathleen: You know, she's like, oh, let's put all these guitar parts that you have on the sampler.

Johanna: The first piece of equipment that I had was actually an Ensoniq Mirage, which is this sampler keyboard that I bought off the street.

Kathleen: She put it on all the keys and started playing it.

Johanna: So, like, that riff, she would, like, play it like fast. And then we would, like, use the keys to pitch it.

And then, of course, the lower it gets, the more stretched out it gets and the longer it gets. And we wanted a long sample because we wanted to fill a whole bar, or two bars.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Johanna: So, we kind of stretched the sound as far as we could.

Hrishikesh: Okay, let me, lemme play that.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - Mirage riff)*

Okay, so that's, that's actually not what she had played originally? That's a pitched and slowed down version of it, played on a different key?

Johanna: Exactly. And it's eight-bit. Eight-bit was like, kind of, junky and bad even back then. So, that sample just has this like, funny quality that had to do with, kind of, the quirks of the machine.

*(Mirage riff fades out)*

Kathleen: There was a lot of weird problems with equipment, but we, you know, always would get the manuals and, and figure it out. And, I remember we both went to this thing about glitch music, which was, like, big back at the time. And it was all these guys, talking about this intricate process that they went through to like pull the plug on their computer and we get this certain sound. And we were kind of, like, giggling 'cause it was so ridiculous.

And it reminded me of, I went to a major label office one time and I saw them trying to recreate the fanzine look on a computer. And I was like, just get scissors, and paste, like a glue stick, and then just do it. It's like, just use your hands, right? And so it was kind of that same vibe of, like, these guys are going through all this, like, crazy expensive equipment to, like, make mistakes and like, Le Tigre was all about making mistakes. Like, it was all about making a mistake and then being like, "I love what that mistake sounds like. Let's make it more."

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - Mirage riff and vocals)*

*(Vocals: "Every day and night / Every day and night")*

The typical way that I worked at that time was to do dummy lyrics. I'd heard the demo of Michael Jackson doing "Billie Jean," and was really, really inspired by hearing him do dummy lyrics. And I had seen Kim Gordon do it when I'd visited her.

And I had done it. Sometimes on tour with Bikini Kill, we would go out with instrumentals and I would write the songs every night. Like, live. I would do them different every night. And then when we had to record, I would have to pick what the lyrics were.

Hrishikesh: Hm. What's one of the dummy lyrics that ended up becoming a, a real lyric?

Kathleen: I'm pretty sure the beginning was the beginning.

I'm pretty sure "Every day and night. Every day and night. I can see your disco, disco dick"

*(Vocals: "Every day and night / Every day and night / I can see your disco disco dick / Is sucking my heart out of my mind")*

I, at the time, had been hanging out with professional musicians. My boyfriend was in the Beastie Boys – which are “Beastie Boys,” not “The Beastie Boys” – was in Beastie Boys, and I was sort of like, learning about the industry. And I was hanging out with Joan Jett and her manager Kenny Laguna. Um, he was in Tommy James and the Shondells, he played keyboards for the Shangri-Las.

And it was literally something Kenny had just said to me and he was like:

"You know, these rock guys. You know, in the seventies, they're doing their rock thing. It's like everything they care about, it's all they care about. But then two weeks later, they're suckin' the disco dick."

And Kenny was kind of, I think, referring to that kind of thing, where there's a lot of people in the industry that, they just follow whatever the trend is. I didn't understand that, because I really came at music as like a way to save my own life and to process trauma and, and stuff like that. And I was also coming from a place where, you know, I felt like my band had had a big cultural effect. Not just on the punk scene, but beyond that.

And so, it was really frustrating to sometimes look around and see ads on tv, for a makeup. And it was like "revolutionary mascara."

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Kathleen: And it felt like this whole “girl power” thing was being stripped of any actual content, and it was just a way to sell products. There was no feminism involved. There was nothing behind it.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kathleen: So I wrote this angry song about, who took the bomp? Who took the joy out of music? Who took the soul out of music? Who took the ideas out of music?

*(Vocals: “You bought a new van the first year of your band / You’re cool and I hardly wanna say ‘not’ / Because I’m so bored that I’d be entertained / Even by a stupid floor, a linoleum floor, linoleum floor / Your lyrics are dumb like a linoleum floor / I’ll walk on it, I’ll walk all over you / Walk on it, walk on it, walking one, two”)*

Hrishikesh: There's this other layer that I have of Mirage:

*(“Deceptacon” by LE TIGRE - Mirage melody)*

How did you make that sound?

Johanna: Okay. So yeah, I played that keyboard part. And that is the same sample.

Hrishikesh: It's the same as this one?

*(“Deceptacon” by LE TIGRE - Mirage guitar riff)*

Johanna: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Wow. And so, you're just basically pressing and releasing the key really quickly so it only plays the first note of the sample?

Johanna: Well, if you listen, I think it's actually getting a couple notes in there. Like that chirpy, chattery sound is multiple notes.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - Mirage melody)*

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Wow. That's awesome.

Johanna: Yeah. I mean, when we, we were just like practicing it, playing around, we were just like, oh, that sounds good. Like it wasn't even something we were unhappy with or felt like we were compromised with. You know what I mean?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Johanna: And then we started putting drum machines on it.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - drum beat)*

The beat was made on an HR 16 B Alesis drum machine,

I went to just like a used music store in Manhattan and was like, "What's your least expensive drum machine?" And they were kind of hesitant to sell me the Alesis because they're just like, this is not, you know, cool. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs) So, what made you want that one then? If they were saying, this one isn't cool?

Johanna: I mean, that just sort of increased its allure for me because I was like, I want the thing that, that nobody wants.

*(add claps)*

We wanted the drums to be, kind of, the chaotic dance energy.

Hrishikesh: I love how gnarly the claps are.

*(claps)*

Johanna: That's actually not from the drum machine. I believe that's sampled.

*(claps)*

It's like, kind of a third layer thrown in there.

Hrishikesh: That makes sense. Yeah. Because you can hear, like, the ghost of other sounds.

Johanna: Yeah, exactly. It's very dirty.

(claps)

Kathleen: And so, she added that, she helped add the structure and then we put the breakdown in.

(*"Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - "breakdown"*)

(Vocals: *"Who took the Bomp from the Bompalompalomp? / Who took the Ram from the Ramalamadingdong?"*)

At the time, a lot of rap records that we liked would start with a hook.

And we were like, kind of obsessed with this idea of like, not waiting until you're all the way in the song. And it was right when your tracks were being available online, and people would listen to 'em for 10 seconds and if they didn't like it, they just would pass by it.

And that was why a lot of people back then were putting kind of their best idea at the beginning. 'Cause then people would be like, wait, what is this? You know? And so we started with a breakdown and then the breakdown came back two more times.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, it's funny to hear you call it a breakdown, 'cause in my head that's the chorus.

Kathleen: It is. It turned into the chorus, but it's like, if you listen to it, there's only pretty much drums and vocal.

(*"Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - "breakdown"*)

(Vocals: *"Who took the Bomp from the Bompalompalomp? / Who took the Ram from the Ramalamadingdong?"*)

And it felt like that's what the song was about. To me it really expressed like: who sucked the life out of, out of music? I mean, the answer is capitalism. (chuckles) But, you know, maybe I'll write that song later.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Kathleen Hanna and Johanna Fateman continues after this.

**BREAK**

Hrishikesh: And so, where did the song go from there? From your practice space, where was the next place you took it?

Kathleen: We built a box out of other boxes that we found in an alley and we wrapped up the eight track in a bunch of clothes, and we taped it. And we put it on a Greyhound bus to North Carolina, 'cause it was the cheapest way to ship stuff. You could literally put something on a bus.

And then our collaborator, our friend Chris Stamey, who was gonna record it in

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, went and picked it up.

So we dumped everything off the tape onto Pro Tools and then we were able to add little bits and bobbles then, in the studio.

Hrishikesh: I kind of can't imagine how stressful it must have been to ship an eight-track like that.

Kathleen: It was just funny 'cause it's like summer, and we're like on the subway with it.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kathleen: And then we're like, at the bus station. Like, there was a lot of legwork in that band that was like, really kind of wild.

Hrishikesh: So how did you end up working with Chris? How did you decide that that would be somebody that you would record with?

Kathleen: I made the Julie Ruin record in Olympia. And then I went to a mastering place in Portland, Oregon. And I had a really bad experience. The guys didn't listen to me at all. I had all these really kooky notes that I wrote in my own notation that I brought. And I really knew what I wanted it to sound like. And then the, you know, icing on the cake was when one of 'em said, "Can you go get us coffee?"

And I hated what it sounded like and I wasn't gonna put it out. I was like, oh, well. I just wasted, you know, a year of my life. I just sort of put it away and, you know, I was going through the depression of, of leaving Bikini Kill. And so I was in North Carolina. And then someone told me like, oh, you know, Chris Stamey lives here.

And I was like, whoa. The guy from the dB's has, like, a recording studio? Like, that sounds really cool.

And so I remastered it with him. And it was awesome. It was such a great experience. It was completely opposite of the one I had before. Chris is one of the reasons I'm still making music.

Because had I not gone back and tried again, and had a really great experience, I don't know if I would've been so excited about writing all these new songs. So, I had that in the back of my head of like, "Ooh, what will Chris do with this?"

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE - verse 2)*

*(Vocals: "I take you home, now watch me get you hot / You're just a parrot when you're screaming / And your shouting / "More crackers, please, more crackers, please")*

It's sung in a really specific register. (chuckles) It's really high. Which, like, it doesn't maybe sound like, you know, Diana Ross high, but it's like, it's squirrely. It's up in the squirrel register.

*(Vocals: "You want what you want but you don't wanna be on your knees / Who does your, who does your hair?")*

You know, I learned that from musical theater as a kid, how to project my voice.

And then I used it in punk because when I first started, sometimes I wouldn't even have a monitor, so it was really important that I sang loud so I could hear myself.

*(Vocals: "Wanna disco? Wanna see me disco? / Let me hear you depoliticize my rhyme / (One, two, three, four)")*

Hrishikesh: There's so many hooks in the song.

Kathleen: It's a hook sandwich.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kathleen: I mean, we weren't specifically thinking like, create a hook here, or create a hook there. It was more like, oh, this, this part's catchy. Let's do it again.

So it wasn't, you know, like rocket science or anything. It was just like, oh, that, that sounds cool. Let's put that in another place.

*(Vocals: "It's alright, alright, alright, alright, alright")*

So when "Deceptacon" became a thing, it was such a shock to us that people really glommed onto that song.

Hrishikesh: And have you felt keenly aware of the lasting power of that song, too? Because I still hear it everywhere.

Kathleen: Okay, so here's the thing that was really cool, for me, about that song, is our friends Howie and Miguel – Miguel was a choreographer and dancer, and he made up a dance. And he came over to my place. Someone brought a video camera. And we hung up a sheet as the backdrop. And Miguel and his roommate Howie wore these pantsuits, and they made these funny hats, and they did the dance. And that was the video. Which like, you know, cost, like, \$30 to make. And so we just, like, shot it and it was like a one shot. They just did the dance, we played the track, we put it out.

And then, years later, someone was like, do you know that people are doing, like, the "Deceptacon" dance at weddings? And I was like, what?

So I went on YouTube and it was like, people were doing it flash mob, when flash mobs were a thing. People were imitating it at talent shows, people would get up at parties, like a group of like 20 people and do it.

So it became kind of this, like, YMCA of electroclash, you know? And that was really great, because it was like, people were participating in the song. They weren't just consuming it. They were like, learning the dance. It was like lowbrow "Single Ladies," you know?

I remember one of my favorite ones was these two girls who were, must have been like 13, doing it in the garage at their house. And then you could hear, like, their parents, like, banging on the door, like, "What are you doing in there?"

And I was like, this is the, like my proudest moment. it was just so kids being kooky together and creative together. And it was like really lovely to be a part of

that in this... we weren't really a part of it. But we were the soundtrack to it. So to be a soundtrack to people's regular lives and things they do in their regular life, that was, to me, the life of the song, that like, I never could have imagined, that made me really, really happy.

Le Tigre is gonna go on tour again next summer. So it feels really lovely and beautiful to have young people come out and see Le Tigre for the first time. Because part of my goal was like, we wanted to put on a show that, if there's one 15-year-old girl there who's like, what the hell? 'Cause it's like video and dancing and costumes and the whole thing.

And like we really go the full way on it. To give this like, kind of, weird feminist present to a kid who maybe hasn't experienced that... I don't know. It's just the best. The best.

HH: And now, here's "Deceptacon," by Le Tigre, in its entirety.

*("Deceptacon" by LE TIGRE)*

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "Deceptacon," and you can watch the music video that has the dance that Kathleen Hanna was talking about.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. Our production assistant is Tiger Biskup. 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.