

[Culture](#)



Kesha performs on the TODAY Show plaza on Nov. 20, 2012 (Wikimedia Commons/Anthony Quintano)



by Teresa Thompson

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

August 31, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

"You can write a song and you can not tell the truth, but your song will suck," pop singer and songwriter Kesha declared during the TED Talk she delivered in April of 2024, entitled "[The Alchemy of Pop](#)."

Her talk came on the heels of teaching a two-and-a-half week course with the same name at the [Esalen Institute](#), a New Age retreat center, where students were surprised to learn the 37-year-old California native had been slated to show them how to transform their deepest emotions into song. The TED Talk was made available for public viewing in July.

Kesha may have shot into public consciousness in the early 2010s with her bouncy yet whip-smart dance anthems such as "[Tik Tok](#)" and "[Your Love Is My Drug](#)," but she is better known by her diehard fanbase for her courage to be radically vulnerable. The emotional honesty of Kesha's music brings a deep sense of connection with her fans.

Sometimes that honesty comes in the form of light-heartedness — giving voice to the silly, the playful, in Kesha's words the "guilty pleasures." In her TED Talk she remarks that when writing the song "Tik Tok," "the dumber the lyrics got, the better the song got." Kesha shows us that vulnerability is not always rage and sorrow; her music makes space for delight and excitement, too.

Pop singer-songwriter Kesha delivers a TedTalk on "The Alchemy of Pop" in April 2024 at the Vancouver Convention Centre in Canada. The talk was made public in July 2024.

Other songs capture the frenetic energy of the ordinary and everyday morphing into partying and nightlife. As Kesha choruses "our bodies going numb, we'll be forever young" in the song "[We R Who We R](#)," the listener relishes in that feeling of celebratory excess that can leave you feeling both exhausted and invincible. She does not seek to explain or excuse the high of revelry — rather, she puts it forth boldly, declaring it for what it is.

But if speaking the truth is joyful then falling silent, by contrast, is painful.

After a productive early career Kesha's output was stymied for nearly a decade by [a series of legal battles](#) between herself and her former producer and record label, Lukasz Gottwald (often known by the moniker Dr. Luke) and Kemosabe Records.

Kesha filed the first civil suit in October 2014, in which she alleged that Dr. Luke had drugged and raped her in addition to ongoing verbal and emotional abuse and exploitative labor practices.

Kesha expressed hope for distancing herself from Dr. Luke to have a healthier environment in which to create her music and protect her emotional wellbeing, especially after having completed intensive treatment for an eating disorder earlier that year. Instead, Dr. Luke countersued her for defamation and refused to release her from her five-album record contract.

Advertisement

In 2016 the [New York Supreme Court declared](#) that Kesha could still record music under her contract without working with him directly, underscoring the uneven power dynamic between producers and artists in the music industry. By law, she had lost agency over her voice — the company of a man she had accused of harming her had the final say over what music she could release to the public and had the right to profit off of it.

Kesha's 2017 album "Rainbow," her first in five years, showcased introspective lyrics and echoing, soul-searching vocals. In interviews, she credited sharing her emotional truth through this album with saving her life. Her hit "[Praying](#)" paints the story of a survivor growing resilience after being "put [...] through hell" and expressing the grace to hope that the person who hurt her experiences transformation and redemption. There is no trite reconciliation or false comfort of completely recovering from the wrongdoing; one of the most wrenching vocalizations in the song is to the words "some things only God can forgive."

Divine themes also shine through in "[Hymn](#)," in which Kesha spiritualizes the ordinariness and messiness of the average person's life. She champions those who live unapologetically ("who we are is no mistake, this is just the way we're made") alongside those who are imperfect ("kids with no religion, yeah, we keep on sinning, yeah, we keep on singing"). Rather than twist or mold herself to someone else's ideal or truth, Kesha makes space for the unpalatable and imperfect.

Her hit "Praying" paints the story of a survivor growing resilience after being "put [...] through hell" and expressing the grace to hope that the

person who hurt her experiences transformation and redemption.

[Tweet this](#)



Kesha performs in Charlotte, North Carolina, on her 2013 "Warrior Tour." (Wikimedia Commons/Kristopher Harris)

Kesha and Dr. Luke settled their lawsuits out of court in June 2023, with no admission of wrongdoing from the latter. Kesha [publicly stated](#) that she was "looking forward to closing the door on this chapter of my life and beginning a new one," yet she refuses to allow that to mean dismissing the past, and her lyrics continue to speak to the inner journey. Songs like "[Cathedral](#)" describe healing as coming back to yourself ("she's there inside me, she was just lost ... I'm the cathedral, finally coming home"). She poignantly describes the process as nonlinear — and even scary — with lines such as "hope is a madman that hides in my mind."

With the release of her fifth album "[Gag Order](#)" in 2023, Kesha was finally free from her Kemosabe contract and regained the right to create and release music on her

own terms. "[Joyride](#)," the first single released through the eponymous Kesha Records, is a celebration of independence. The song seems to be a rebuff to the attempted cajoling of a potential lover, declaring "I'm already rich," and "Oh you say you love me? That's funny, well so do I."

After all the music made and all the court cases endured, here she is — complex, complete and continuing to communicate a message as powerful as it is valuable: it is holy to speak the truth.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 27-Oct 10, 2024** print issue under the headline: Holiness as honesty in the music of Kesha.