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Music Review

Kesha, *Gag Order*

Kemosabe Records / RCA Records, US 2023

With songs such as “TiK ToK,” “We R Who We R” and “Your Love is My Drug”, Kesha made her brand of party pop known on American radios and during middle and high school dances during the late 2000s and early 2010s. During the ascendance of popstars such as Katy Perry and Lady Gaga, Kesha’s work stuck out as a particular brand of dirtbag pop that disregarded rules and encouraged living for the moment through dancing, partying, and imbibing substances.

However, Kesha’s public image would change in 2014, when she sued to be released from her contract with producer Lukasz Gottwald, known as Dr. Luke, for emotional and sexual abuse over many years, including rape and unfair business dealings.¹ Dr. Luke countersued in multiple states for defamation. Kesha’s cases were dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired and one judge did not believe her claims lived up to the merits of the accusation.² Thus, she was still obligated to create music for Dr. Luke’s label, Kemosabe. Though Dr. Luke is no longer a producer on any of Kesha’s albums, he will still reap the financial rewards of Kesha’s work. Within this context, it is apt that her fifth and final album on the label with which she signed a contract at the age of 18 is entitled *Gag Order*, designed as *GAG ORDER*.

The album’s title is a play on Kesha’s legal situation. She said to Rolling Stone, “I feel as if there has been an implied gag order for a very long time now [...] with my ongoing litigation hanging over my head, I have not been able to speak freely because I know everything I say is scrutinized.”³ The

1 Coscarelli/Rogers 2016.

2 Coscarelli 2016.

3 Ehrlich 2023.

album runs 38 minutes and 58 seconds with 13 tracks. Three tracks were released as singles – “Eat the Acid”/“Fine Line” (dual single) and “Only Love Can Save Us Now”. While she cannot speak about her abuse directly, she does gesture at it throughout the album, as she has done on previous records. This album reaches, however, a deeper emotional level than previous records. She has had what she has called a “spiritual awakening”.⁴ She is conscientious of her trauma and wishes to confront her audience about its aftermath.

While Kesha is not “religious” in the traditional sense herself, religious imagery saturates her album. She considers herself a “seeker”, and this album includes passing references to Jesus, God, and resurrection, as well as invocations of spiritual gurus such as Ram Dass, Osho, and Oberon Zell. This is not her first time employing religious allusion. *Rainbow*, her first album after her suit against Dr. Luke, contained the power ballad “Praying”, where Kesha sings:

You brought the flames and you put me through hell
I had to learn how to fight for myself
And we both know all the truth I could tell
I’ll just say this is “I wish you farewell”
I hope you’re somewhere prayin’, prayin’

In the song’s climax, Kesha belts, “Somethings only God can forgive” before hitting the high note. On her 2020 album *High Road*, Kesha declares in the synth-pop song “Raising Hell”, “I don’t want to go to heaven without raising hell.” The spiritual allusions within Kesha’s discography are ripe for analysis beyond a short review. However, to pique the interest of the readers of this journal, I will focus on two songs and on some of figures Kesha references in her album.

“Only Love Can Save Us Now” shifts back and forth from synthesizer-based verses to a guitar-centric chorus. She opens the song with a strong stanza:

Tell a bitch I can’t jump this, Evel Knievel
I’m ‘bout to run you down the church and the steeple
Been baptized in Hollywood in the Cathedral
The power of Christ compels me, I’m a demon

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Keep singing hallelujah nothing can save us
Goddamn perfection in his image, he made us
Yeah, Jesus take the wheel, I'm going through phases
The bitch I was, she dead, her grave desecrated

The Kesha her audiences are nostalgic for, from the early 2010s with a dollar sign in her name, is now gone. The music industry made her a demon for speaking out against a system from which she cannot be saved. In this way, Kesha's career provides a complex view into the music industry, the power dynamics between producers and artists, and the industry's intersection with gender and capitalism. Listening and reading "Only Love Can Save Us Now" alongside Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and other studies on demons and witches can provide an intriguing way to think about cultural and political production and theological terms together.

Kesha's own view of the divine can be found in the song "Eat the Acid". The song was inspired by Kesha's mother's warning not to take LSD, which Kesha recounts in the song 23 times with the line "You don't wanna be changed like it changed me." While she has never publicly acknowledged taking acid, Kesha writes that she was changed on a late night in 2020. After that night, there is a world that she cannot unsee, like the world after her mother's psychedelic use. Kesha describes this night as a conversation with God. Writing for *Nylon*, she says, "I felt a wave of golden light pass through my body. A sense of peace. I began to hear what I think of as my true self, my consciousness and soul speak to me. I saw how connected we all are, as cliché as that may sound, and in the damp night in the middle of the summer of 2020 I talked to God."⁵ In the song, her lyrics sound ominous during the section that recounts her mother's warning, but then she recounts her own ecstatic moment:

I searched for answers all my life
Dead in the dark, I saw a light
I am the one that I've been fighting the whole time
Hate has no place in the divine

The bridge then has four consecutive repetitions of "in the divine" to bring us to the final chorus. The chorus has the lines, "You said that the universe

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is magic / Just open up your eyes, the signs are waiting.” In the repetition of her mother’s warnings, Kesha experiences a spiritual awakening about herself and her trauma in an encounter which she calls divine.

Kesha’s spiritual influences are on display throughout the album. A piece of a talk from Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*, appears on the “Ram Dass Interlude”. Kesha samples Osho, the controversial Indian philosopher and founder of the Rajneesh movement, on “All I Need Is You”. While Kesha has not publicly discussed the claims of sexual abuse against Osho and his followers, she notes that this song is about “loving myself, and it’s also a love song to my highest form of consciousness and to some sort of God”, though the song is about her beloved house cat who died in 2022.⁶ Finally, Oberon Zell, self-identified wizard and a founder of the neo-pagan Church of All Worlds, has the first line of the album’s final song, “Happy,” where he says, “And sometimes you think you’re doing the magic/ And sometimes you realize the magic is doing you / And this was one of those moments.”

Gag Order speaks of pain, depression, and exploitation. There is hope, divine encounter, but it is mixed with rage. When there is seemingly no one, who is there? Kesha’s songs reveal and reflect how one person responds to abuse and loneliness by attempting to make sense of their experience – even when they have been silenced, gagged, or systematically refuted – by finding a source greater than one’s self. She did not turn to the outside or to a transcendent force. Rather it was a power from within, a deeper sense of self, which got her in touch with the Kesha we experience on this album. Teachers looking to incorporate music into their curriculum could assign this album or select songs to listen to alongside testimonies of survivors of abuse, theories about the relationship between religion and abuse, or even readings on the question of evil.

In June 2023, a month before their court date, Dr. Luke and Kesha settled his defamation lawsuit. They released a joint statement. Kesha said, “Only God knows what happened that night”, a reference to the occasion on when Dr. Luke had allegedly raped her.⁷ Dr. Luke continued to deny the allegations. Yet here we find an ever-clear picture that Kesha has faith.

6 Ehrlich 2023.

7 Coscarelli 2023.

Bibliography

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Discography

- Animal* (Kesha, US 2010, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
- Gag Order* (Kesha, US 2023, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
- High Road* (Kesha, US 2020, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).
- Rainbow* (Kesha, US 2017, Kemosabe Records / RCA Records).