

Song Exploder
Lady Gaga - Abracadabra
Episode 300

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.

Lady Gaga is a singer, songwriter, producer, and actress from New York. She's one of the biggest artists in the world. She's also won 14 Grammys, 2 Golden Globes, and an Oscar. And in March 2025, she released her sixth album, Mayhem. For this episode, I talked to her about a song from that album called "Abracadabra." She co-wrote it and co-produced it with Andrew Watt and Cirkut, and they recorded it in Rick Rubin's studio, Shangri-La. That's also where we recorded the interview for this episode, which happens to be the 300th episode of the podcast. Here it is.

("Abracadabra" by LADY GAGA)

(Vocals: "Abracadabra, amor-ooh-na-na / Abracadabra, morta-ooh-ga-ga / Abracadabra, abra-ooh-na-na" / In her tongue she said, "Death or love tonight")

Lady Gaga: My name is Lady Gaga.

Hrishikesh: Before we get into the specifics of the song itself, I was wondering if, as you were going into making this album, if there were any big picture ideas that you were thinking about or aiming for.

Lady Gaga: Well, I will say that returning to my earlier sound — what I discovered kind of on the Lower East Side, when I was first making music — that was something that I was excited about.

Hrishikesh: What was behind that? What made you want to go back to your earlier days?

Lady Gaga: You know, I, I expressed the darkness I felt as a young person through music, like, my whole life. And it was scary. And I felt that around me for a really long time.

So, my earliest records were kind of dark. And they embodied live instrumentation with electronic music.

But over time, I just, artistically, was going in lots of new musical directions, exploring myself. And then music became a business, which was not why I did this.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Lady Gaga: So when I decided to make this album, I think I was just wanting to reclaim something that made me, me. And my partner, Michael, was like, you know, “You don't have to be afraid of your darkness anymore, because you've really gotten a handle on it. Like, it's okay to go back there.” So it was important to me. How do I get myself back? How can I make all of these dreams, these like, gothic fantasies that I have in music, how can I make them real, but that I don't have to wreck myself?

I think trusting myself that I could make a dark album – and that I would be okay – was a big piece of it.

Hrishikesh: Let's go to the day that the song started. Do you remember how that day began?

Lady Gaga: Me and Andrew Watt and Cirkut, we were actually working on another song that didn't end up on the album. It was a, like, a mid-tempo thing.

But then Cirkut was like, I've got something I've been working on. I wanted to play it for you.

(Cirkut's original electronic beat)

And I went *up*. Right away. I was like, what is that? That is crazy. And we just stopped everything that we were doing.

Andrew was like, that could be a hard beat to write over, 'cause it's so *busy*.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: And I was like, watch me.

Because that kind of electronic chaos, that kind of, like, razor sharp thing, just speaks to my soul so deeply.

Hrishikesh: How would you articulate the feeling that you had when you first heard this beat?

Lady Gaga: It's a feeling of your heart racing as fast as possible. Some adrenaline, excitement, deep thrill, and freedom.

It almost reminded me of how I used to feel when I went out at night alone, in my early twenties. I would just, like, have nothing to do but discover the night. Like, what music was I gonna hear? What DJs were gonna be playing? Like, what cool artists was I gonna run into? It was really nostalgic.

But it was still really modern, and I was also excited for the challenge. 'Cause I could hear there was something special in what he had created, but that it also needed to become a fully formed song.

So I just started writing. We turned it on, and I just got on the mic.

Hrishikesh: Like freestyling?

Lady Gaga: Oh yeah. A lot of my music, especially when we work to track, is freestyled. And it happens pretty quickly. But it didn't have words yet. It was just kind of made up words.

(imitates freestyling) *"Da-da-da-da."*

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: And then me and Andrew went into this room here, and we started to work on a pre-chorus. And, you know, we had to build the chord structure to come out of that beat. Cause it's gotta, like, match Cirkut's atonal basslines. It has to grow out of that dissonance and that tension. Like, what is gonna make it open? Because that beat, in a way, is kind of closed.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: So what was gonna happen to open up the song? But we did it at the piano, with the guitar.

(guitar chords)

It had this kind of gothic quality to it.

Hrishikesh: What were the first words that you wrote?

Lady Gaga: It was "Like a poem said by a lady in red. You hear the last few words of your life."

(guitar chords & vocals: "Like a poem said by a lady in red / You hear the last few words of your life")

I remember thinking of, like, being at a party and somebody kind of lording over the party, saying like, "I'm gonna decide how your evening goes. I'm gonna control the whole thing. I will be in charge of whether or not you fall in love, or you get too messed up to even make it home."

Hrishikesh: When you were thinking of that image, which side of that did you relate to more? Like, was that person who's kind of lording over the party, is that a figure that *you* usually are at a party? Or are you usually the person on the other side being like, "Okay, what's gonna happen?"

Lady Gaga: When we were writing it, I was imagining I was at the party and I was being kind of beset upon by this figure that was inclined to torture me into having the night of my life. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Is that an experience that you feel like you've had, where you've been subject to someone else's setup?

Lady Gaga: Yes. Lady Gaga's setup.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Lady Gaga: You know, for a long time, keeping up with that side of myself, you know, like if you're never dropping your stage persona.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: And we all have like a public facing persona that, and if you just never drop it, and if it has an edge to it. You know, too much of anything is bad. But then sometimes our dark side, it, like, really challenges us, and makes us great. 'Cause we learn a lot.

I actually think part of what Mayhem is about is the duality of me being both of these people.

Hrishikesh: It's interesting because you both referred to it as torture, but also the night of your life.

Lady Gaga: (laughs) Yeah. Well, those are some of my issues, for sure.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) But I think in the context of the world that you'd constructed for yourself, the, the rigor that you'd made for yourself by inventing Lady Gaga and then having to live up to that, I could see how both of those things would apply.

Lady Gaga: Well, you know, as someone that played classical piano since I was really little and I had a lot of really strict teachers and went to ballet and, you know, all my disciplines. I will say that, like, there is a kind of suffering in discipline when you're working really hard. And I think I just took that to a really far degree in my work, my whole life.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Lady Gaga: And I became kind of someone that thrived on intensity.

I think that this song is definitely grappling with intensity. It's a test. But it's also kind of not up to you.

I think that's a lot how I feel about being an artist. I don't really feel like I fully chose this. If I was a tree, it would be like someone just grabbed the trunk, and just said, "This is where you're gonna grow."

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: So the Abracadabra piece, it's a spell that this lady in red is casting on the listener, on the nightclub. And that pre-chorus, it's a ritual. It's like, I'm gonna read you this poem and we're going to have a ceremony and we're gonna see how tough you are.

(guitar chords and melody)

So we had written a chord progression that we then gave to Cirkut to put into the track.

(add synth chords)

To open up into a chorus.

(full chorus instrumental)

And I started just going "abracadabra, abra, abra." And I was saying "abracadabra" over and over again at first.

But I was so excited about (laughs) making up my own words. That it could be anything. 'Cause it was this spell, like what would this spell even be? But I knew that death and love was something that I wanted to be, like, at the helm of what this lady in red was saying to the room.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Lady Gaga: And so I started thinking about Latin and Italian and, what would be like, the Gothic romance words.

Like *mort* in French is death. So then I was asking Paul, our engineer, to look up

different words. And then, he was like, *Morta* is the God of death. We spent a couple days carving out every single word.

(synth & vocals: "Abracadabra, amor-ooh-na-na / Abracadabra, morta-ooh-ga-ga")

But in order for me to really know that it was lyrically right, I wanted to hear it with all the harmonies.

(lead & backing vocals: "Abracadabra, amor-ooh-na-na / Abracadabra, morta-ooh-ga-ga / Abracadabra, abra-ooh-na-na" / In her tongue she said, "Death or love tonight")

I couldn't hear it without it.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: 'Cause the magic and the, the glamor of the song is in how gaudy it is in the chorus. And I couldn't hear if it was the right words until it was fully opulent.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Lady Gaga continues after this.

Lady Gaga: What was so deeply, like, inside of me when I was writing is some of New York. In New York, the spirit of ballroom culture is something that I have always admired and has been deeply meaningful to me my whole life as an artist. And the LGBTQ+ community and the way that I've been embraced as a human being and been accepted as a young person, I've, like, found my people.

And I think there is something about this spell that's also speaking to being a resilient person, and being inspired by resilient people, and what it means to be tested constantly in your life. And to say, "I'm up for the challenge. I'm gonna do this."

So, when we eventually got to the verses, it actually became very spiritual, and it became about resilience.

(verse 1 vocals: "Pay the toll to the angels / Drawin' circles in the clouds")

(add kick drum and synth vocal loop)

And then it was less about this being, like, completely grim, this story, and more of a dance club anthem.

(cont. verse 1 vocals: "Keep your mind on the distance / When the devil turns around")

Hrishikesh: What were you imagining with those lyrics?

Lady Gaga: It's, what do you have to do to keep going, to get to the next phase? As you're headed toward all the good in your life and the devil's on your back, like, don't turn around.

Hrishikesh: And what about the way you delivered those lines? What were you thinking about for that?

Lady Gaga: Vocally, this song was, it's an interesting performance.

I actually think that the thing that I was channeling the most was a kind of metal gravitas, but in a pop way.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Lady Gaga: So I was sort of trying to marry what I would imagine it would've sounded like if, you know, Iron Maiden was doing the song.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, I can see that. They have like a, a sense of authority.

Lady Gaga: Right. Authority is the right word.

(cont. verse 1 vocals: "Keep your mind on the distance / When the devil turns around")

And then we put that into Cirkut's track, and then he was building it even more. We actually went through, like, three different versions of production. And we ultimately ended in, like, a house style.

(house-style verse instrumental)

I remember being, like, emotional when we decided to do that.

'Cause I was like, this is right. Because everything for me always went back to the dance floor. So, it was completely full circle. And that lyric right after: "Hold me in your heart tonight, in the magic of the dark moonlight."

Like, that's sort of like acknowledging that sometimes our demons can be our friends. 'Cause we know them so well. Like, I'm gonna be there for you when you go through this.

(Vocals: "Hold me in your heart tonight / In the magic of the dark moonlight / Save me from this empty fight")

Hrishikesh: I also wanted to ask you about this sound:

(complex electronic sound)

It sort of twists and morphs and, in some ways it's almost more like sound design.

Lady Gaga: Cirkut made that.

Hrishikesh: There's like an element that's descending and ascending at the same time.

Lady Gaga: Yeah. Sounds like the club's gonna explode.

We just were really open to trying different ways to making it feel chaotic. That played a huge role in everything that we did. There was always something distorting in some way, or bending. Building the tension that would release.

(synth, bass, & vocals: "Abracadabra, abracadabra / Abracadabra, abracadabra / Feel the beat under your feet, the floor's on fire / Abracadabra, abracadabra")

It just started to get crazier and crazier, and by the bridge, when we got to the bridge, I became a completely different person.

(bridge vocals: "Phantom of the dance floor, come to me / Sing for me a sinful melody")

It wasn't like, I was like, "Oh, I think we should do opera here." Like, I just started singing that way.

This ending is this huge crescendo.

(outro instrumental & vocals: "Ah, ah, ah / Ah, ah, ah, ah / Ah, ah, ah / Ah, ah, ah, ah")

Hrishikesh: For all the stuff that was happening fast and intuitively, um, were there any parts of the song that felt like you really had to labor over it to get right?

Lady Gaga: I would say, the second verse. The lyric "no return."

(verse 2 vocals: "Don't waste time on a feelin' / Use your passion, no return")

I changed that lyric after the song was mixed. Because it was "Don't waste time on a feeling. Use your passion. *It's your turn.*" And I like, called everybody into

the studio and I was like, "We have to change this. This is wrong."

Hrishikesh: Why was it wrong?

Lady Gaga: Because, "It's your turn," I felt, was signaling something that the song was kind of already saying. We knew we were up for the test. And you don't want a second verse that's, like, sort of revisiting the first verse and not going anywhere new.

But, "No return," it was raising the stakes. Like, you can't give up. And the song didn't have that in it yet.

And what was also bugging me for a while was: "Choose the road on the west side, as the dust flies, watch it burn."

(Vocals: "Choose the road on the west side / As the dust flies, watch it burn")

Cuz it was such a metal lyric.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Lady Gaga: And I'm like, is this just wrong for what this song could be? Because there's so much about "Abracadabra" that is just not what anyone would think of as what would be on the radio or streaming.

I mean, it's, like, not easy listening.

(instrumental gradually builds in)

It's got all these niche references, and it's so maximalist and loud. And so, during the songwriting process, I'm battling a lot of judgment, inner judgment. I'm judging myself for what I've created. But that was what it was supposed to be.

It has all of the pieces of something that is quintessentially me. The intervals of the melody, the made up words, the fantastic idea mixed with these heavy dance beats with rock instrumentation, like, this blend of things is what Lady Gaga is to me.

It's almost like, if you had one chance to architect a building to show who you are, but you were desperate for people to know.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Lady Gaga: So you just, like, put gargoyles and columns and marble, and grass, and there's a lake... and it's just because you're just trying to say, I'm everything, I'm all these

things.

Yeah. So I was judging myself and then I sort of accepted who I am through the process and became okay with it. (chuckles)

What I found that day was an understanding of a challenge that I had been a part of for so long that I had been so afraid of acknowledging and knowing. And I finally, like, put a name to it all.

It has helped me to take ownership over something that used to run my life in a negative way. You know, it's like, you create yourself. I made Lady Gaga. But then like, people reflect back to you what they think. They have, maybe, a fantasy of you or dreams for you that are not yours.

But I took back the dreams that were mine. And what I realized is that the biggest dream that I had was being myself as an artist.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Abracadabra," by Lady Gaga, in its entirety.

("Abracadabra" by LADY GAGA)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more, including some footnotes that go with this episode. You'll find links to buy or stream "Abracadabra," and you can watch the music video.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.