

Kae Tempest is a writer and musician from Lewisham, South London. Their first two solo albums Everybody Down (2014) and Let Them Eat Chaos (2017) respectively, were nominated for the Mercury Prize. Their third, The Book of Traps and Lessons (2019) was shortlisted for an Ivor Novello, Best Album.

Alongside music, they have released several poetry collections, a Sunday Times-bestselling novel The Bricks That Built the Houses (2017) and the book length essay On Connection (2020). Their play Paradise (2021) premiered at the National Theatre in London. The Line is a Curve (2022) is their fourth album.

The Line is a Curve, Kae Tempest (2022)

The Line is A Curve is about letting go. Of shame, anxiety, isolation and falling instead into surrender. Embracing the cyclical nature of time, growth, love. This letting go can hopefully be felt across the record. In the musicality, the instrumentation, the lyricism, the delivery, the cover art. In the way it ends where it begins and begins where it ends.

I knew I wanted my face on the sleeve. Throughout the duration of my creative life, I have been hungry for the spotlight and desperately uncomfortable in it. For the last couple of records I wanted to disappear completely from the album covers, the videos, the front-facing aspects of this industry. A lot of that was about my shame but I masked it behind a genuine desire for my work to speak for itself, without me up front, commodifying what felt so rare to me and sacred. I was, at times, annoyed that in order to put the work out, I had to put *myself* out. But this time around, I understand it differently. I want people to feel welcomed into this record, by me, the person who made it, and I have let go of some of my airier concerns. I feel more grounded in what I'm trying to do, who I am as an artist and as a person and what I have to offer. I feel less shame in my body because I am not hiding from the world anymore. I wanted to show my face and I dreamed of it being Wolfgang Tillmans who took the portrait.

I've loved his work for a long time. Years ago, at a major exhibition of his, I stood in front of his photographs in tears. I felt like he got it, the unsayable things were all there, being said. It was beautiful.

I was honored that he agreed to shoot me. I don't think anyone has ever got me on camera the way he did. I think the vulnerability and strength of the cover portrait affirms the themes within the album.

I worked again on this album with art director Harris Elliot. Over the last three records and two poetry collections, we have grown together as artists, friends, people and I feel he really understood what I was trying to say and do with this album. All the nuances of his design feel in keeping with the themes beneath the lyrics. It's something I'm grateful for. The creative community I'm part of, rooted in South-East London, deeply felt connections with my collaborators and the guidance and inspiration of artists I respect. All of this is present in this record, and everything is contributing to the whole.

Because I work in different forms, I think sometimes people have been confused about what it is they are supposed to be listening to when they listen to my records. In the past, I went so deep into narrative, plot, the creation of characters that the result of my labors fell somewhere between concept album, long-form poem and dramatic monologue, which all made for what I would call a respectfully demanding listening

experience, but that others might have just called hard work. For me, now - this album is an album. And these songs are songs. Of course, there's a through-line. There's a reason the songs exist in the order that they do and I'd prefer people to listen start to finish in one go, but the songs don't have to be played that way to make sense. And in fact I'm excited by the idea that people may discover my work through encountering a song off this record in a random setting, away from the others. My hope is though, that if encountered this way, they would go on to discover the piece as a whole.

This album forms part of the same constellation as *On Connection* (a non-fiction book I published in 2020) and *Paradise* (an adaptation I wrote that was staged at the National Theatre in 2021). These are the first three works to be published under my new name, and since I have come out as trans/non-binary. Although they don't deal explicitly with trans issues, they are all explorations of identity. And I would say the chokehold of the gender binary and my deep struggles within it have been implicit in all of my work. More detailed and specific explorations of gender, queerness and what it means to me to be trans are present in projects that are still underway.

I worked with Dan Carey again on this record. I love working with him. He is the perfect collaborator for me because he makes me feel anything is possible. We have grown so close over the last eight years of working together that we have a creative shorthand that doesn't need words. He knows when I feel something he's doing because he can hear my pen start moving faster over my notebook. I know when he's feeling something I've done because of the way his body moves in response to a line. It creates a mutuality that is beautiful; it's hard to know where his ideas and mine begin or end. We create together. We discover together. Everything is written in the room, in real time.

I feel like I was more involved musically on this album than in previous albums, simply because I know myself better and I know the process better, and once we got started and made a few songs, I had a clear vision for what I wanted the sound-world of the album to be. I knew I wanted Kwake Bass on the drums for example, or Luke Eastop's guitar, Daisy Beau's vocal or a verse from Confucius. They are all long-time collaborators of mine. People I've played in bands with since I was a teenager in the pubs and squats of New Cross and Peckham. Me, Confucius and Kwake were in a crew together at sixteen. When all this began and I started rapping, it was with them. I wanted to acknowledge those roots in this album. Something only possible because of the sensitivity and skill of Dan's production. How to weave where I've come from with where I'm at. How to represent that the line *is* a curve. I'm only here because I was there, and I'm still there, even though I'm here.

I like to have the next album begun before the current album is released. We snatch days when we can get them, and *The Line is A Curve* grew out of one of these snatched days. I was still on the road with *Chaos* (which is where the voice note on *Smoking* comes from). *Traps and Lessons* was wrapped but not released yet. Dan and I got a day together and it was such a relief to be in the studio and to have no expectations on what we were creating that we just got going in the spirit we always get going in; we started to see what would happen. We wrote *Priority Boredom* and *I Saw Light* in that first session and the music for what would become

Smoking. I could see there was something coming towards us from that first day, and gradually over time, through sessions snatched when we could get them, the album began to take shape.

Because time is precious, when me and Dan get together, we work fast and with real intent. The more you get out of a session, the more you know what it is you're trying to do. Eventually, after *Traps* had been out a while and the touring was well underway, we got a full week to work and by the end of it, we were pretty much there. We had the album in demo form. And then it was lockdown. Which gave the project time to breathe and for me to think about how I wanted to record the album when we eventually could.

When it was possible to, we set about recording the live instrumentalists and producing the music of the album as a complete piece. I knew I wanted to record the vocals in one take. Something I did with *Traps and Lessons* too, but this time, building on the experiences I had making that album, I wanted to take it further and to record the full take to an audience of one.

I realised that actual communication with another person creates a dynamic in my performance that I can't summon alone in the booth. The delicacy of being alone in the recording studio is amazing, I love it, but I wanted this record to be communicative. I wanted the vocals to really be speaking to whoever encountered them. I decided on doing three takes in one day to three different generations of people. A man of 78 who I'd never met, a woman of 29, the poet Bridget Minamore, who is a good friend of mine and then to three young fans of 12, 15 and 16 who had responded to a social media post.

What we discovered went beyond our expectations. The lyrics sounded so different each time. There were different meanings in the words depending on the generation I was speaking to. The second take, to my friend and person of my own generation, Bridget was the one. Dan said he had *never* heard those lyrics spoken with that much decisiveness and detail. That's what you hear on the album. Apart from a few very small deviations to other takes, a line or two here and there, what you're listening to is live, spoken in one go, to an audience of one.

This communicative aspect, and the contributions from other artists create a completeness to this album that I think is new. My work is so often about loneliness. But this album, although it starts in the dark, in the cynical isolation of *Priority Boredom*, moves into a space of community as soon as we hit the second track *I Saw Light* with Fontaines DC frontman Grian Chatten telling his poem.

Grian and Confucius MC provide the backing vocals throughout the album. There's a song with Lianne La Havas and one with ássia. A skit from Kwake Bass. All of the collaborators are close friends of mine and artists who I deeply admire, with the notable exception of Kevin Abstract who is an artist I've never met but whose work I love.

Rick Rubin played *The Book of Traps and Lessons* to BROCKHAMPTON when they were in with him at his Shangri-La studio in Malibu, I got a beautiful message from one of the members saying what an experience it had been to hear it that way, so there was commonality there and I felt some kinship. It was actually Rick that suggested I reach out to Kevin Abstract when we were looking for an artist to feature on *More Pressure* and Kevin was up for it, which made me so happy. I think Rick's presence can be felt across this album. Although lockdown meant we couldn't get over to the states to work with him in his studio, his influence on

Dan and I over the last few years has been profound and I think this album is a built on everything we learned making the last one.

The Line is A Curve has a beautiful heart, it was built on love and there is deep love running through it. My involvement in every aspect of putting it out, including writing this myself, make me feel closer to the process of offering it to the world than I have before. My hopes for it are that the major themes as I see them, of resilience, acceptance, surrender, come to life in the people listening to the album. But in truth, now it's done and heading out there into the world, my hopes for it are irrelevant. It belongs to whoever discovers it, and means whatever it is they take it to mean. All that's left for me to do with the record is wish it safe travels and head out there to make it live on stage.
