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John Moe: Hi, welcome to life. Not the cereal, not the board game, the actual life. I can even use its last name: life itself. While you're here—and it hasn't been forever, and won't be forever—you will form attachments to nouns. People, places, and things. You may experience love, which is wonderful and enriching and just the goddamn best. That, I should have said, is the good news. The bad news is that you will experience losses. Not death all the time. But sometimes, yeah, death. Relationships may crumble, idyllic situations will end. And remember what I said about life not being forever? Mm-hm. Well, you will likely lose some people. And then you will have that loss and grief and all that goes with it.

Meanwhile, while you're in life itself, you are also participating in time—not the magazine, not the Morris Day band. I'm having a hard time defining time, so I'll lean on Webster's. “Time, the continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” And time moves in only one direction: forward, taking you with it at the speed of time. So, when these two get together, life and time—again, not the magazines—you have loss, and you have forward motion, and you have grief, and the linear march of existence that is living in time. And at that point, maybe you make something. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Music: “Denial” from the album *The Process* by Judah & the Lion.

This wasn't linear

No, it wasn't step to stepping

The process, for me at least

Was just a perpetual progression

'Cause just when I thought that I had accepted it

I'd just sink into another depression (I can't get out of bed)

(Music fades out.)

John Moe: That's the band Judah & the Lion, with a song called “Denial”, off their new album *The Process*. Other tracks on that album include “Anger”, “Bargaining”, “Depression”, and “Acceptance”. Sound familiar? Yep, those are the five stages of grief as described by the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. The album *The Process* is divided into five sections, one for each stage. Judah Akers and his bandmate, Brian Macdonald, have been playing together as Judah & the Lion since 2011. Americana kind of rock sound with notes of bluegrass and folk. Four albums. They do well on the charts, a lot of fans. They've played a lot of late-night TV shows. They tour the country.

Success obviously doesn't mean you're free from problems. *The Process* came out after Judah had experienced some losses in close family and in his marriage. And as he dealt with that, he revisited the stages of grief as described by Kübler-Ross. And music started to show up.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Judah Akers, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Judah Akers: Hello. Thanks for having me on.

John Moe: The album is *The Process*, and we'll get into why it's called that and *The Process* of putting it together. But let's talk about some of the events that went into this album, because I think it's some painful stuff, but it's important to kind of establish going into a discussion about this work of art that you made. If you can, tell us about your aunt and uncle.

Judah Akers: Yeah. So, I mean, this record—as far as the story goes—really started just with me learning how to process my stuff that was going on in my life, particularly with grief and the heavy things that were kind of going on. I had an aunt that overdosed—or they don't really know if it was a suicide or not, but whatever, just like really struggled mentally. And then an uncle on the other side who also lost his life to suicide. And that was all kind of happening like in the middle of the pandemic in which also I was going through the biggest heartbreak of my life with the divorce. You know, it was just like everything was kind of crashing in on me at once. And mentally I just found myself in a pretty rough spot. So, yeah, this record, *The Process* has to do like with I guess all the different ways that I processed unhealthily—

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—exposing some of the—like, my relationship with alcohol was very toxic and terrible. I think I tended to kind of bottle things up, even just from like an emotion side. Kind of, you know, push it down and move forward, rub some dirt on it type thing. And I quickly realized that just wasn't working for me, especially just after the divorce and the way that it went down. So, for me, I found a lot of different ways to help heal. And the biggest thing was just facing those demons.

John Moe: I saw somewhere that you originally learned guitar from an uncle. Was this the uncle who taught you guitar?

Judah Akers: Oh, no. No, different uncle. But yeah, I mean, that's a big part of my story. I'm very—I grew up in middle Tennessee, so just very tight-knit with my whole family. I come from a really sweet natured family, big hearted, but definitely some mental health stuff going on there.

John Moe: How about you? Have you had mental health stuff going on? I know it's in some of your music, so I suspect that it's at least an issue that's been on your mind over the years.

Judah Akers: Yeah. So, mine kind of sparked a little bit in 20—around the 2015 area. I was 24/25. We were touring like around 150 to 200 shows a year. That comes with a lot of tension and a lot of distraction. Obviously. My parents were going through a really painful divorce at that time, which was just foundationally very unraveling for me. I just had a lot going on, especially with the band having some success too. There's all these kind of emotions flying. But around that area, my mom was kind of in and out of jail. And I think for me, that was kind of when I started my like mental health journey path, just out of straight up necessity. It wasn't like a thing that I necessarily wanted. Like, I just needed to do something to change, because I was dealing with—I didn't know this at the time, but I think I was in a very deep depression and didn't really—at least for me and my journey with depression, like I didn't really know it until I was kind of on the other side of it, to realize how deep I was in that.

And then in the last few years, really suffering from like anxiety, panic attacks, stuff like that—trying to control everything that honestly was kind of out of my control. So, I've been lucky to have like such an amazing community around me, and I've definitely had my bouts with depression and anxiety. But really grateful to kind of be in a better spot, nervous system wise and health wise.

John Moe: Did you get help for that?

Judah Akers: Yeah, so I did pretty much everything. Like, I did obviously therapy. EMDR, was a big part of my journey with kind of getting down to the root of my “why” of like—obviously, I was going through a heartbreak, really painful stuff just logically was happening. But you know, at the core of it, getting down to those places and really learning how to, you know, breathe your way throughout it and control your nervous system was a lot of the work that I did. I got really into like Wim Hof as well with the ice baths and saunas. And my stuff that I bottled also like surfaces chronic body pain in my back. And until I really dealt with the anger, which kind of goes back to the—maybe a little bit of the record, you know, I was really good at crying, like going into those emotions. I think probably being a songwriter, you're kind of naturally digging up those wells of emotion.

And my mom, it should be noted—like, I come from a family of therapists as well. My aunt, she teaches psychology at Tennessee Tech, and my mom is a therapist. So, like therapy and all this stuff like it wasn't necessarily—I didn't really—I never really had like that negative connotation towards it. But yeah, I think it wasn't until I really kind of faced a lot of this stuff and did a lot of the work. You know, which is really hard to do, to dig up those wells. ‘Cause at least for me, like I was scared of what I was going to find. *(Laughs.)*

John Moe: Yeah. Well, I'm interested when you talked about the chronic pain, because I think that is—that's so overlooked so often when it comes to mental health, the impact that kind of chronic physical pain can have on—I mean, we're all one big thing. It's the physical and emotional and mental—it's all kind of wrapped up together. But how did the physical pain compound some of the mental health issues that you were having?

Judah Akers: Well, I got really into “the body keeps the score”. My mentor/therapist, like brother, now friend, James—he also says, “Well, if your body keeps the score, then your body knows the way.” And I think that that came with a lot of freedom to me. Because our body, you know—

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Just however you want to look at it, if you're spiritual or not—you know, our body is sometimes telling us stuff. And I think for me, I had this chronic lower back pain, like couldn't play a show without it hurting, like icing every night and doing all this stuff. And until really dealing with some of the anger issues and some of the stuff that I had kind of pushed down, I think I probably had a lot—I had a lot to be mad about and angry at with the world or God or whoever. Like, just a lot of just shitty things were happening, and I always I guess was taught to kind of like make this optimistic twist around it and make this hopeful twist and be okay. And like, you know, our music is hopeful, which we want it to be hopeful. We want it to be a light, but there was this pushing down that I think really surfaced in my back and shoulders specifically. And until I really like—even the anger that came out, you know, was very ugly at times, like super misdirected. I mean, I would yell at friends for something so stupid that obviously wasn't about that moment.

But until I was able to get there emotionally, like my—I had this one week, this is maybe TMI, I don't know.

John Moe: It's the right show for it.

Judah Akers: But I was just yelling at everybody. I was like—my fiancé—I'm just recently engaged to, in a different season there, but I was like yelling at my fiancé about something stupid, like my manager—like, it was just one of those things. And it sounds terrible, but that week was when my back stopped hurting. And so, it's wild. Like, what you're saying, how it's all connected and can be kind of quite frustrating as well.

John Moe: Yeah. Yeah. That was during the making of this last album?

Judah Akers: It was during, yeah.

John Moe: Wow. You were carrying a lot. What resolved the back issue?

Judah Akers: Well, I started doing neurofeedback actually, which was another thing that really helped me. That's kind of this new, noninvasive kind of study that's happening with—so, I was an athlete prior to becoming a musician. And I had three pretty bad concussions, one kind of severe and the other two mild. And so, I actually started getting—it's called neurofeedback, essentially like going in and unblocking these neuropathic waves from your back lobe to your frontal cortex or whatever. And come to find out like the place that was connecting my, essentially, emotions and connecting it to physical pain was completely blocked out. And so, just doing that and then doing the EMDR therapy that I was doing with James really was what kind of unlocked that anger. And then once that kind of—I call it the kind of the week of hell, like when I was just like, just yelling at everyone—we have a song called “Floating in the Night” that's kind of about that experience—that, you know, it really started to kind of heal.

John Moe: EMDR is often used to address a particular trauma. What was the trauma that was at the center of your EMDR process?

Judah Akers: So, a lot of it—yeah, a lot of it is kind of going up and using like, you know, for me, prayer. You know, if someone's like using breath or meditation to go in and resurface these memories that are really hard. And I don't want to maybe go into the specifics of the memories, but it was more than just like, you know, the divorce. Or it was more than just the, you know, the suicides. It was stuff that was kind of going on in my childhood where I was like—a lot of the work was called like inner child work and figuring out like where, you know, I was trying to find love as a child and maybe it wasn't there. And then the other part was like shadow work, which is—which I can be honest about, which was finding the ways that I failed in my marriage, finding ways that I had a lot of shame and guilt and kind of this crazy pressure on myself. And learning to kind of sit with those things and understand that they belong and understand that those parts of myself that I don't like deserve to be loved and deserve to be kind of nurtured and taken care of.

James always talks about it. It's not survival of the fittest, it's the survival of the nurtured. And so—and to learn how to nurture those parts of us that need to be loved, that we're scared of letting to be loved, the parts of us that I don't like, and I don't want you to see. Those are the parts of you that you maybe you don't like and don't want to see, like those are the parts of us or myself and my experience that you kind of have to bring to the table and allow—if you believe in God or whatever it may be—to like understand that love again.

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Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Judah Akers of Judah & the Lion in just a moment. As we go to break, here's a song from the anger portion of the album, “Floating in the Night”.

Music: “Floating in the Night” from the album *The Process* by Judah & the Lion.

Looking in the mirror

And I think I see it clearer now

I placed the blame on everyone else

Always really liked to be right

It doesn't really matter how it happened

When you're looking back

No one really wins in the end

Hits me every now and again

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: We're back with Judah Akers.

It's an incredible weight that you were carrying going into putting this album together. And I want to talk about putting the album together. But I want to just touch for a moment on the divorce, because that's a big deal, and it informs obviously a lot of the grief and a lot of the pain that you were going through. Can I ask what was the divorce process? How long was it coming, and how did events unfold?

Judah Akers: Yeah, it was like a few-year process, like it is for a lot of people, I feel like. You know, we were dealing with a lot of this stuff in secret for a while. My ex was going through a really difficult time mentally during the pandemic. And I was too, quite frankly, like looking back. It was probably like a three-to-four-year journey. And honestly, like even writing this record, I had kind of thought that I was through most of like the pain of it, you know. Like, a heartbreak is a heartbreak. And I feel like I could probably say like both of our hearts were broken at this point. But it was one of those things where, as we kind of chose to make this record about the stages of grief or Kübler-Ross's stages of grief—you know, I can go in and be like, man, in 2020 or whatever, I was in complete denial about where I was at, where our marriage was at, how I was failing, how she was failing, all this stuff.

And so, it's really interesting to kind of think that you're on that other side, and then go back and be like, man, this is actually super beneficial for me to write this record. Because I'm digging up these things that I hadn't really—I thought I had processed or whatever, 'cause I was doing, you know, better mentally, but I really hadn't like looked at. And so, now that I'm going into, you know, a new marriage or a new relationship, it was like I need to kind of get better at these things. Or “better” is like the wrong word. I need to like own up and try to learn from this and grow. I don't know if that's too vague or what. But yeah, it was about—it was a few-year process.

And we actually—what's funny, John, was we were kind of going through that big transition during our last record, which was *Revival*. Which, you know, I was like having panic attacks doing vocal takes, during that record. And you know, you can go with the entire cover of “Landslide”, and in the middle of it I had to kind of stop, 'cause I just—I couldn't hardly breathe.

John Moe: Ooh, let's listen to that cover of landslide! Try to hear what Judah's talking about.

Music: “Landslide” from the album *Revival* by Judah & the Lion.

Well, I've been afraid of changing

'Cause I built my life around you

But time makes you bolder

Even children

I'm getting older too

Oh, I'm getting older too

I'm...

(Music fades out.)

Judah Akers: You know, at the time, it was like I didn't want to write about the divorce. Like, it's so exposing. It's terrible to expose yourself like that. You're exposing, you know, your failures. You're exposing, again, like parts of you that you don't necessarily like. And then you're saying, "Hey, I'm going to be promoting that the biggest failure of my life."
(Laughs.)

John Moe: Buy a ticket, come see it!

Judah Akers: Yeah, exactly! And it's hard because, you know, I wanted to be honest about kind of the pitfalls of what happened, but also honor my ex and know that she was in a space where she was hurting too. So, when we decided to kind of initially write this record—

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—conceptually based off of the five stages of grief that Kübler-Ross published, you know, it was extremely beneficial and actually very healing for me. And I think for Brian too, my bandmate, just to kind of be able to learn more about the story as well.

John Moe: When did the idea of making music about all this come along?

Judah Akers: Last May. We had recorded the first single on this record, which is "Heart Medicine". And you know, that song was so much about meeting my now fiancé and kind of having this posture. Like, I was going through a lot of transitions and healing in my life. And she was—Sina was such a big part of that. But after we released it, we were like, man—like, even Brian was like, "I just don't think that we can move on to this next season without honoring like the pain of what you just went through."

So, that was when—you get me? Because honestly, I was writing mostly just angry songs that were just pissed off energy, like very negative. I still had a lot of unforgiveness in myself, in my ex, in my family, like in my friends that were trying to navigate this. And I was like I just don't—this doesn't really feel like songs that we want to bring to the world. It's like negative energy. And then when we had this idea of making it about healing and making it about forgiveness and making it about acceptance, that was when it started to kind of ring true. 'Cause it wasn't dishonoring the pain or the anger of it in some ways that I have been guilty of my past, of just moving to the optimism or that I think some people would say it's like toxic optimism. But I think to truly find hope or to truly find love or light, it's like you do

have to sometimes experience true pain and the depths of that darkness. And that's a harsh reality, but at least from my experience, it has been true.

John Moe: So, you were—it sounds like you were kind of stuck in one Kübler-Ross stage, in the anger. Did deciding that you're going to make music about this process, did that free up the other stages in your own psychology?

Judah Akers: Yes, I would say it helped me. You know, in the first song it talks about—again, I'm an athlete in my foundation. Like, when I was going through this after the divorce, I was like, man, give me a step-to-step program that I can do. I've been to AA with my mom, like to support her. And like, give me that 12 step program. Like, I need to learn how to heal my heart quick. I'll do whatever it takes. Like, if it takes years or whatever. And the truth is like there's no curriculum. There's no rule book to healing. There's no step-to-step program. Everybody's dealing with heartbreak or losing someone or death. Death of relationship or death of a friend or a sibling or a parent or whatever. Everyone deals with it differently, because none of our stories are the same.

And so, I feel like when you're kind of looking at those stages that are different, and it's not linear—like, there's days, you know, still like that I wake up and I'm like, “Why am I feeling this depression? Or why am I feeling anger again?” Because you know, I see a friend that triggered me, and I'm like, “They wronged me!” You know, all that stuff. And so, like I think anger became the stage that I definitely was like I really need to kind of deal with this. And then as we were writing it, I didn't really know much about bargaining. Transparently, I learned a lot just through my aunt and other resources that I had. But you know, bargaining was one that I was in for a while too, because it's just like almost—for me, it was like this personal inventory check of like, okay, how did I fail here? I don't feel like what I did necessarily was the demise of the relationship. Like, and I could face that and be like, okay, I don't think that we were the reason why I was like this—like, the reason why we ended this relationship. But there are still some things that I can improve and look at.

And then that harsh reality—it's weird how the steps—so, it's denial. I learned so much about like denial is actually this way of like your system going into shock, and it's kind of protecting itself, protecting actually. Because your body can't—if it was going to absorb all those emotions at once, you would just die. (*Laughs.*) You know, you would be crippled.

John Moe: It'd be too much.

Judah Akers: It'd be too much. And so, your body's kind of protecting you, but then after that you start—because you're out of control, and then the anger kind of gives you this false sense of control. Because you're like, “I'm just going to bulldoze this. Like, fuck everyone. Like, I'm going to take control.”

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And it feels good, really. I mean, for me, at least, it felt like, oh, I'm taking control again in my life. And that subtly leads into this like reality check of like this is actually—is not beneficial, you know? Like, unforgiveness, this type of false like control is actually something that's hurting me. It's hurting my relationships with friends. It's kind of turning me

into a little bit of an asshole, which I have never really been in my life. And then that bargaining, you know, you have to come to terms with the reality of everything. And that is super depressing, or it can be. 'Cause you're like, man, this is just a loss, and I have to be okay with that. And you know, which leads to acceptance at the end, but yeah. It wasn't like—at least for me, it wasn't like this like linear thing that, you know, I got through denial, then I got to anger, and then I—it wasn't—you know, it wasn't that step by step program. It was—acceptance to me is just like learning to hold depression when it comes. It's learning to hold anger and treat it like a friend and ask questions.

John Moe: Well, I think that's been sort of a myth of people or a misreading of Kübler-Ross over the years for a lot of people. They think that it's all going to happen. Like, first I'll be in denial, and then that'll go away entirely. And then it'll be anger, and then that'll go away. And it's—I mean, I know in times when I've experienced heavy grief, you know, I might be in denial, and then I might be in acceptance, and then I'll switch over to bargaining, and I'll get angry. You know, it's a messy process, and it sounds like maybe you were at a bit of an advantage with all these therapists in your life and kind of a very considered approach that you were taking to this, that you were prepared for some of that gray space.

Judah Akers: I definitely had—looking back, I just had like so many people that were lifting me up and carrying me through it. My best friend and my sister, my brother. And then my mom, she was actually in a really good space with alcohol during my divorce. That's why—and my aunt, like my dad. Like, I had so much support in a lot of really educated people, luckily. I did feel that. And honestly, when James told me that—you know, that it's not this step-to-step program. Like, you can't go and do, you know, 50 pushups every day and be strong. You know, which was what I was used to. Like, you can't expect that you're going to wake up one day and not have this anger in you.

And that's—I think now it's like that's kind of the beauty. Like I, during one of my EMDR sessions, I had this thought about how angry Judah—as like bringing him into the room and asking him questions. And asking like why are you angry? Like, tell me. And I know it kind of sounds like hippie for those that haven't experienced this, but it—for me, it was this empathetic thing, that I could react to almost my angry side. Which I just—it's not the sexiest part of myself. (*Chuckles.*) You know, like this angry—but when he told me why I'm mad, that I'm mad that people cheat. I'm mad that, you know, my uncle's kids have to grow up, you know, not with their dad. You know, like and you start getting to the source of like the anger, then it like, oh shit. Like, duh, you're angry. Like, that's okay. Let that out, you know. And once you're letting it out in a healthy way, then you know, those times where certain triggers come up in relationships or whatever it may be, then that's when the healing starts to—I've noticed it for me to start to kind of set in.

John Moe: Well, let's talk about the music a little bit. Let's talk about getting down to make the music. How much sense did you need to make of what had happened to you before you can songs about this? Like, how much processing did you have to do to figure out, okay, this is going to be the chord progression; this is going to be the lyrics for the bridge that I need to put into these things?

Judah Akers: That was the fun part of all of it. 'Cause I definitely was on the—I still say like on a pie chart; I still have this like sliver of like where I feel like I'm in acceptance most days. But I definitely was doing way better in my life. Again, the body pain, the panic attacks

were stopped. Like, almost essentially down to zero now when it was like an hourly thing. So, the puzzle pieces of going back and writing about like when I was in denial was like the creative fun part for me and Brian. It was like this beautiful puzzle piece.

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We felt like that it—we kind of had the story, and now it would—it was kind of backwards, honestly. Like, we've never really had this concept for a record. We mostly just like—I don't want to say have thrown songs together, but mostly we were just like we wrote songs, and you know, it's like, “This is fit the vibe of the record.” It's like, “I think it does.” For this one, it was like, “Alright, we want this to be well balanced to where we have like three or four songs in each section.” And so, there was a time—I mean, this podcast has maybe proven how much I was actually in this stage, but we had three or four angry songs. (*Laughs.*) You know, it's like—but we did have like two acceptance. So, it was fun to kind of figure out how to tell the story in a balanced way. That was really, really fun.

So, we went from that May until really like I guess January of this year, where we kind of finished the record. So, it was kind of this long process, no pun intended.

John Moe: So, did you feel like you had to be well and be recovered? It sounds like, you know, it's an ongoing thing. And I mean, hell, the album's called *The Process*. But did you have to like, say, “Okay, here is what I've learned in order to make this song,” or is the songwriting itself an exploration of those issues?

Judah Akers: I think it's both, you know. I did tell Brian, I was like, “I don't want to put pressure on myself or in these interviews to say that I'm completely healed.” You know, like that's just not reality. At least, that's not my experience with reality. But I do—I think writing the songs kept pointing me to healing. It's really funny. Like, when we recorded “Floating in the Night”, for instance—which is one of my favorite songs on the record; it's in the anger section. I noticed like I would come back feeling angry. Like, I would come back home and have dinner and, you know, somebody would say something that pissed me off and like—and it's weird how going through those emotions— And I told Brian, I was like, “This is going to be a difficult record to sing live, because it's going to bring up these emotions. I'm going to see these emotions in other people.”

And we kind of came to terms with like but that's going to be like the most like healing part of any tour that we've done is being able to express these emotions and allow the music to kind of live and stand and allow people to deal with that anger inside of themselves. And hopefully they connect in their own way to their own story. Which is why we make music in general. So, I think for me, it was like the biggest part of my work honestly was learning to be gentle with myself, learning to allow yourself the grace of going through the process.

You know, my mom's an alcoholic. She struggled with alcohol for, I guess, the last 10 years. during the peak of kind of my mental health, I was really dealing with alcohol, like in a really toxic way. And I was so ashamed of that. Because, you know, I obviously don't—I've seen the negative effects that it's had, and it's like why am I coping in this way? And so, I told James, it's like, “Man, I'm really struggling like with alcohol here, and I'm super embarrassed about it.”

And he just looked at me, John, and he goes, “Why would you not be? You know, like how—? Like, what do you expect from yourself?” You know? And it was like one of those like most like freeing moments; there was no guilt. It was just like of course you are; you know. Like, you're going through the biggest, you know, heartbreak of your life. Like, what? Do you expect yourself to be perfect? And then going back and talking to that 30-year-old that was, you know, over drinking at night and stuff like that and asking him the way he felt, you know, it was just like—I'm just sad. Like, I just can't go to sleep. You know, and all this stuff.

Then you're like, okay. Like, I can allow myself the room and the space to grow and be a human and have this human experience. And honestly, that epiphany or that whatever was when like true love and understanding of like every part of me kind of deserves love, even that 31-year-old that was getting drunk every night, you know?

John Moe: Yeah, it sounds—I mean you—it takes recognizing the humanity that—you know, just the basic flawed creature that we all are.

Judah Akers: Yeah.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Just ahead, the role of faith in the process of grief. From the depression section of *The Process*, here's a bit of “Only Want the Best”.

Music: “Only Want the Best” from the album *The Process* by Judah & the Lion.

Fight or flight, it's black and white

I froze in time, and I'm stopping the traffic

I couldn't catch my breath

[00:35:00]

I don't know why I even tried

To fight it, when the fact of the matter

Was you already left

There, alone inside my room...

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Judah Akers of Judah & the Lion.

I know you've made some worship music in the past. It seems like faith plays a pretty big role in your life. What role did your faith play in this process of dealing with all this pain, going through this really painful chapter of your life?

Judah Akers: Yeah, I appreciate you asking that. I... I honestly was kind of going through those stages with God. Like, I was angry at God in a lot of ways. It felt like life was kind of falling apart, and I didn't really feel like, you know, he was there with me. I grew up like a strong believer, and I've gone through like my deconstructions and reconstructions of the church and the ways that I've been hurt by the church, the ways that my friends or whoever has been hurt. Honestly, for me, at the end of all that anger and stuff like that, like the gospel of Jesus is maybe the greatest story of love and self-love and learning how to allow those pieces of me to allow God to love. And the truth is that—or what I've found in my experience is that that's what true love is.

And so, when I was able to see that unconditional love that I was met with by God in those low moments, you know, it was the most important part. You know, at times in my depression, it was so low. Like, I was never suicidal or anything like that. I never had like self-harming thoughts, but I was definitely in a position of I didn't know that I would wake up the next day. Like, that's how low that I felt. And in those moments I can look back and be like—as I was like crying out to God, I felt maybe the most love I've ever felt in my life. So, it's weird kind of going into that really shitty season, where you're kind of at this like all time low moment after moment after moment. I just kept asking God, I'm like, “I feel like I've hit rock bottom already.” (*Laughs.*) Like, “Can I start coming up out of this pit?”

And I feel like I was met with like, “No, but I'm, actually here. I'm here with you.” And for me, that was everything. So, I definitely—like, a part of my healing and sharing this journey, you know, God was at the center. But there were times where I allowed myself to be very honest with God, which I hadn't really necessarily been in the past.

John Moe: Talk to me a little bit about the process of the sequencing perhaps on the album. Because you mentioned there's an angry section. And it's a big album. It's 19 songs. What went into figuring out what songs go in what stage? Like, how does—the sequencing and the kind of chapter organization of it, how did that work?

Judah Akers: Well, honestly a lot of it came from me sending songs to my aunt, who teaches psychology at Tennessee Tech. Because I was like—again, going back to writing these songs, I didn't—you know, me and Brian, we're speaking from our own experience. Like, we're definitely not experts in this field. We're not experts on the Kübler-Ross stages of grief. At the core of—we're just telling a story that's from a human experience. But having my aunt, I would send her songs and be like, “Hey, do you think this fits in the depression section or the bargaining?”

She was like, “This is bargaining.”

You know, like the sequencing was really fun in that way. Because, you know, when I learned that denial was this shock, like your body going in this fight, flight, or freeze. And you're pretty much just frozen. That really illuminated to me like, oh, this song is totally about those moments. So, that's more of a testament, I think, to the people that are smarter than me that were, you know, around us supporting it, telling us which was in which. That really helped. And then that made the storytelling part, which is what I love about our career the most is telling stories, that's when it became really fun.

John Moe: I talk with a lot of musicians and comedians and writers. And often they'll say, "Well, you know, getting up and playing in front of people, that's my therapy."

[00:40:00]

Or "Telling jokes is my therapy." And I admit it sometimes makes me a little nervous, because I think, well, maybe therapy should be your therapy.

Judah Akers: (*Laughs.*) That's smart.

John Moe: (*Chuckles.*) And it sounds like you've got a great therapist, and you're very familiar with what therapy is. Did the music-making and the songwriting and recording—was that part of a therapeutic experience? Or was that outside of that concept at all?

Judah Akers: For me, the music was definitely a part of the healing. Like, I remember—this is gonna maybe sound cheesy, but the first time my childhood dog died. Which was like, you know, life was terrible at 16 or whatever, after our dog Murky died. He got ran over by a car, so it was kind of like this like sad story. And it was my first like look at, "Ah, you know, this sucks!" I went and punched like a locker room door the next day.

And then my mom was like, "You should go write a song. Let's channel that anger." And so, I feel like music has always been a part of that process for me, like learning how to dive into those emotions. And I think making this record obviously was such a big part of that. And also a part of my healing is I was—I got really into painting and other outlets to kind of really dive into different emotions with it. Because I think one thing that I kept telling even my manager, I was like, "I don't want to keep making money off of my pain." (*Laughs.*) Like, it was really frustrating. And a part of that is a job or whatever, but like I just, in my own healing, I always like—I feel like I'm writing a record for this marketability or whatever it may be. And it's like I don't like that it's like glorifying this pain or, you know, whatever in me.

And so, painting became this outlet where like I'm not making money off of it, or it's not my job. But it was so healing for me. So, I would encourage anyone that is listening—and I'm sure you have different ways. I'm curious to hear like what your ways of coping with pain are. Because I feel like journaling or writing—it doesn't have to be a song if you're not a songwriter, but like go and explore different ways creatively to kind of help you process those emotions. Because for me, even outside of being like a songwriter or storyteller, I think that's been such a big part of my process.

John Moe: Yeah, historically for me, it's been music. (*Laughs.*) Because I've—in my music, I've never—my band has never been a threat to become a full-time job. So, because it's been so low profile and so recreational that it takes all the pressure off of figuring out what—you know, what I'm doing and the appeal to an audience that something like a podcast or a book would have. So, yeah. It's kind of—

Judah Akers: Well, see, and that—I resonate. Like, for me, like I was like, “Well, I'll just cover it up. Like, if it's a shitty painting like I'll just keep going.” You know?

(John agrees with a laugh.)

So, I don't know what I'm doing necessarily, and I'm sure you're not giving yourself enough credit on your music. But I resonate with that, even like on the painting side of it. I'm just like—there's no pressure here to have a hit on this, you know, painting or whatever. (*Laughs.*)

John Moe: We need to normalize adult hobbies in our society, I think.

Judah Akers: And being bad at something.

(John agrees with a laugh.)

And learning and growing. Like, I really wrestle with that. It's like I don't like anything that I'm not naturally good at, you know? (*Laughs.*)

John Moe: Right, right, right. There's the competitor in you. Making an album is so much work, and especially one with 19 songs. Good lord. Just all sorts of little technical decisions and equipment issues. And it's just a massive undertaking. How did it go for you trying to do all that labor about something concerning this massive pain that you had been through? With your aunt and your uncle and your divorce and the mental health situation that you were in—to kind of carry that and then have to figure out like, okay, what's the mix going to sound like? All of that, how did that go?

Judah Akers: Well, I think that was maybe the healthy distraction or like the fun part of it. You know, naturally for me, what I love about the job is writing the songs and then performing it. The studio sometimes is like—I'm not very like technical, and I'm not technically savvy. And so, that's where Brian is kind of more of the yin to my yang. He's very good at it, and the respective producers that we worked with. I kind of like let them worry about that. But on this one, it was fun.

[00:45:00]

Because we were—in some ways, we were like, “Do we make the anger section just like super punk rock and like angsty and like—?” And it's funny, because the anger section has like—the banjo is probably the most prominent. And it's angry, and it feels kind of feisty. But the fun part of it was like acceptance has this like jolly—I'm like doing a lot of “woo-hoo!”s and stuff like that. It feels very free and sweet. And it all just kind of like naturally happened.

And maybe that doesn't make it sound as intentional as it was, because it definitely was intentional. But it just—the songs kind of like led themselves pretty purely.

John Moe: Yeah, no that sounds like a healthy process. Well, I enjoyed the album very much, and I enjoyed going through *The Process* with you. And thanks for talking us through the process of making *The Process*.

Judah Akers: (*Laughs.*) I know, there's so many puns with this record for sure.

(*John agrees with a laugh.*)

But I appreciate you. You know, this podcast obviously is like so healing for a lot of people, and so I appreciate you being willing to dive in and ask questions that are hard. And I appreciate you having me on and listening to the record.

John Moe: Alright. Well, good luck playing these songs on the road. Take care of yourself out there.

Judah Akers: (*Laughs.*) Yeah. Thank you.

Music: “Sweet Surrender” from the album *The Process* by Judah & the Lion.

Headstrong, ground in love

I'll forgive what's already done

Let it in, and let it go

Hope carries on, I'm already home

(*Music fades out.*)

John Moe: That’s “Sweet Surrender”, the last track on *The Process* by Judah & the Lion. It's from the Acceptance part of the album.

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

John Moe: Like I alluded to in the show, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief model was not meant to be a linear, predictive progression of what every person would go through. Later in life, she said she regretted the misunderstanding that people may have had. The model has plenty of critics too, who point to a lack of peer review in her process and a lack of objective clinical observation. But faith in the stages persists in psychiatry and in popular culture. I'm not here to say Kübler-Ross is wrong or right, but I think part of the reason the idea of the five stages sticks around and gets believed and gets turned into Americana rock albums is that when you're in a tunnel, it's nice to see the light at the other end, to know that others have

been in the same tunnel where you are. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross died in 2004, and frankly I don't know how to feel about that.

Our show exists because people support it with financial donations. That's our whole way of existing. We like to exist! (*Chuckles.*) We hope that you like the show, and you get something out of it. So, please become a member. If you've already done so, thank you very deeply from the bottom of my heart. If you haven't, it's easy. Go to MaximumFun.org/join, find a level that works for you and hit *Depresh Mode* when you get all the lists of different shows.

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Hi, credits listeners. I'd like to see a version of that movie *Inside Out*, except instead of feelings, they have little characters for each Kübler-Ross stage of grief. I guess it would have to involve someone dying in the movie. I don't suppose other people would want to see this movie. But I'd be there, at the cinema, with my popcorn! Alone. *Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”.

Depresh Mode is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

[00:50:00]

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

Becca: Hi, this is Becca from Western Massachusetts. I want you all to know that it helps me to know that you are here with me, and we are in this together.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

Speaker 1: Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: A worker-owned network.

Speaker 3: Of artist owned shows.

Speaker 4: Supported—

Speaker 5: —directly—

Speaker 6: —by you!