

[00:00:00]

John Moe: Imagine you go outside one night, and the sky is filled with stars. You're somewhere without much light pollution, so there are just so many stars. So many of them. And then the stars start communicating with you. Sending you signals, trying to tell you things. And it doesn't feel like a hallucination. It feels very clear, very real, even though you know it's not the reality you're accustomed to. So, then you've got two realities. Do you reject the old one? Do you reject the new one? What would you do?

It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Music: “LOL” from the album *Love Hate Music Box* by Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

I want you, but hon

We've been through enough

There's so much of us

Is there no love?

Like my heart hurts

Like my jaw hurts

Like my job hurts

And I'm talking to a wall

Hello, operator, can I call you later?

You know shit's been crazy 'round here

(Music fades out.)

John Moe: That's the band Rainbow Kitten Surprise, with a song called “LOL” off their new album, *Love Hate Music Box*. The voice you heard was the band's lead singer, Ela Melo. *Love Hate Music Box* is the first new Rainbow Kitten Surprise album in six years, and those six years have been an eventful time for Ela—involving inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations; psychotic breaks; dissociation; a diagnosis of bipolar disorder; and, yeah, a sky full of stars that appear to be communicating with her.

This time period also involved attempts to carry on with her music career anyway, and it has involved canceled tours. Because her mind wasn't working in a way that was consistent with the life of a touring and recording professional musician. Ela, who came out as a trans woman in March of 2022, says she's more on top of things now, more in command of her mind and direction than she was before. Enough that she was able to get this new album made, which is being followed by a big tour starting in September.

It's important to know that getting to this better, calmer, more productive place did not involve a conviction that the stars weren't communicating with her. In fact, being open to that mystery was instrumental in her recovery.

Rainbow Kitten Surprise has been together since forming in Boone, North Carolina, at Appalachian State University in 2013. Their song, "Fever Pitch", hit the top 40 in 2018. They've played Bonnaroo, Austin City Limits, Red Rocks. Rainbow Kitten Surprise has both a wonderful name and a dedicated, loyal following of fans.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Ela Melo, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Ela Melo: Hi, thanks for having me.

John Moe: Thank you for being here, and congratulations on the new record. It sounds great, *Love Hate Music Box*. I sometimes ask this very broad question of musicians who come on the show: what's the new album about?

Ela Melo: I think what it is thematically or whatever—you know, what it is is like a real time snapshot of healing and growth and an urge to try something that's a little different. And you know, but also clear all—what it served me for was clearing all my skeletons out of the closet. Not all of them, but some of them. You know, some of my musical skeletons. It's the byproduct of 6+ years of really wanting to make music that I was proud of, and that other people would enjoy. And yeah, it took a long time to get there, but we definitely got something that resonates with me, anyway.

John Moe: And why that title? *Love Hate Music Box*?

Ela Melo: (*Chuckles.*) I'm always like kind of wandering through life, thinking that I'm gonna solve the whole thing. I think that's probably a fairly common phenomenon. It's just like, oh, if I just understand this one thing about life, then everything will make sense, and the puzzle will just like piece itself.

But so I, you know, I'm always adopting these binaries of like, oh, life is about approach and avoidance. It's like, you can only either be headed towards something or headed around it or away from it. You know, it's like are you gonna get up, or are you going to lay in bed? Are you going to make that cup of coffee? Or are you going to decide it was, you know, too much?

[00:05:00]

It's like as simple as decisions are, there's a lot—there's a depth to them. And I think that the closest sort of whatever system of understanding like the way the universe works and my place in it is to say that I kind of came to this thing of like it's love and hate. I think a lot of things arise from—or everything arises from like wanting things. And as soon as you stop wanting, then you really stop kind of being human as I understand it.

And so, you know, I was just like—it was my way of reframing some hard truths, was to say that love and hate as a binary exist like on a universal level. And just because something—you know, just because you feel hate from something doesn't mean that's what they're intending to emit on a personal standpoint. And it just kind of is what it is, everything emits those things, love and hate, all the time was kind of the way I was thinking about it. So, it was like that allowed me to tackle some like difficult relationships in my life, because it was just like some of this is just like vibrational energy, and you can't do a thing with it. It just is, and you just have to bear through it until it's over.

And so, *Love Hate Music Box* is just like—it's a snapshot of the things that—yeah, it's a snapshot of love and hate. And the music box was just to say: and it's also something that you can jam.

John Moe: Yeah, it also comes in a box.

(They chuckle.)

Well, I know that you've been dealing with some mental health issues. And this is the show where we talk about that intersection between your mental health and the stuff that you make and the person that you are. When would you say, for you, that your challenges with mental health began? When did you sense that there was some problems?

Ela Melo: Oh, it was more than a sense. But yeah, it started when I was around 29. I started feeling that I was being communicated to. And I remember walking outside at night, while I was staying at my parents' house, and I just like looked up at the sky. And it felt like the sky was watching me back. It felt like all of those stars and the moon and everything—and I'm not saying that they're not. I don't deny any part of a reality that I've experienced or been told, because I'm just like, hey, there might be some truth to that.

But that's kind of where it all kind of started was just like this sense of like, oh man, I feel like I'm being communicated with, or things are just getting weird. You know, and a lot of things got weird over COVID. You know, which is kind of where that landed—you know, was still in the midst of that stuff. And it was just like a lot of things, you know. It's just like you started to have to wrestle with your brain a little bit more. There was less distraction from it. So, yeah, when I was about 29 is when shit started to hit the fan, so to speak.

John Moe: And how long ago was that?

Ela Melo: I'm 32 now.

John Moe: Okay, so fairly recently. When you say you were being communicated with, what was being communicated to you? Were you hearing voices? Were you reading into it?

Ela Melo: No, I've never heard voices. I used to see things—unmedicated, you know. And in psychosis I'll—like, I'll see, you know, cartoons or stuff playing on the walls or stuff. It depends. But it's just like—it's more like a feeling, you know? And it was this sense of like—you know, up to that point in my life, I really was not that much of a spiritual person. I just didn't really go for it. I was like, nah, what's in front of me—what's tangible is what's real about this universe. And all the other stuff is just kind of like things that we convince ourselves of.

I don't think that way anymore, you know. And I have kind of a story that goes hand in hand with that, but I don't know if we want to get there.

John Moe: Are you ready to get there now?

Ela Melo: Um, I'll tell you. So, it's just kind of a cute little story. I was staying at my parents' house at this time, and I was just like—this is like kind of after, you know, the whole stargazing thing, to where I felt like I was being watched by the universe in some senses and being taught that, you know, like stars or constellations are gods or things like that. And I was just like, “Things are getting really weird inside of my head.” Like, if there really is a God, and if there are things like—I don't know, angels—you know, I was like, it would be really nice to have a guardian angel of some kind. Somebody who's just like looking out for me.

And I shit you not, I was like kneeling—I remember tying my shoes in the bathroom doorway. And my mom peeks around the corner, and she says, “Hey, I was just cleaning up, thought you might need this.”

[00:10:00]

And she lays down this little angel pin on the counter. And I was like, “Whoa.” And that was kind of the start of what I would have considered at some point to be almost a supernatural existence. I think we all experience how weird the universe—and synced up it can be. I don't think I have to explain that to anyone. And most people that I talk to, you know, I talk to about the spirit, or I talk about vibes being real. You know? You know, it's just like, yeah, just is what it is. And I think that's kind of—that's not... (*Sighs.*) That's a relatively new phenomenon, at least in like Western culture. You know, for me being a part of it, at least.

John Moe: So, when this feeling started, this feeling that you were being communicated with, when you were seeing some things, was that distressing? Was that scary? How did that make you feel?

Ela Melo: Oh man. Well, you're so caught up in it. It's hard. You know, it's like that made me feel—I mean, I kind of like went through—I don't know, it was probably—let's see, that was like probably in September 2020. It lasted at least six months of kind of this whole other narrative that I was living. I was talking to the stars and stuff.

I know that sounds like—you know, it's like how did that make me feel? I mean, exhilarating. Imagine you step outside, and you feel like you have the audience, and the audience is the entire universe. You know, that was pretty big. I mean, scary, but big. And it was just like don't fuck this up.

John Moe: So, it didn't feel like a psychotic break. It didn't feel like a mental health problem?

Ela Melo: Well, you tell me, have you ever had a psychotic break? Do you know what it feels like?

John Moe: I have not.

Ela Melo: Okay. Well, you don't—first of all, there's no way out once you start to get in it. At least, you know, there's medication that can bring you down. But you, personally, you don't have a whole lot of options. You gotta go through it. Probably until the next time you sleep or like—lord knows what it could—it looks different for different people. But you know, for me, I've been through several. And the psychotic breaks have been worse sometimes, and sometimes they've been more manageable. You know, to the point where I can still drive a car and kind of do a thing, you know. And then to the point where I'm just absolutely floored, because everything is trying to eat me. So, I've experienced a whole range of that kind of stuff.

John Moe: How far back do those go?

Ela Melo: This all really started like—I guess 2020, you know?

John Moe: Okay. So, prior to that, prior to being 29, like were any of these things issues growing up? Or (*inaudible*)?

Ela Melo: Um, no. I mean, I had some mania about when I was maybe like 25/26, to where I became an insomniac. And I would stay up for two and three days at a time. For years I lived like that. I just couldn't sleep, you know. And I was just like, well, might as well be productive. You know, might as well just go and make a cup of coffee and then, you know, go on about my day, and I'll just sleep when I sleep. I still kind of have that attitude towards sleep, even though I know how necessary it is now to like proper, you know, mood regulation and higher order functioning and like just all this shit. These are just words to me.

But to me, what that means is it's just you're not at your best, and you're not capable—or not necessarily capable, but you just don't connect with people as well if you're spaced out. And being super tired makes you do that. So, you know, I try to avoid it as much as possible. But.

John Moe: Yeah. So, then you were having these experiences. Were they creating problems? Were they intensifying? Like, how did they evolve?

Ela Melo: Oh, man. Well, the first thing already—you know, just walking out and seeing all the stars and feeling like they're looking at me. Once you—I mean, just imagine. Kind of go

down this rabbit hole with me. It's just kind of like everything, kind of all inanimate objects then start to take on—and again, I'm not denying that everything has a spirit, or everything moves energetically. I think trees talk to each other, and I think animals talk to each other in their way. You know, I think everything—you know, all life and even some things that we wouldn't consider life are probably, to a degree, intelligent. I would stand by that. I think that's going to be proven at some point. But anyway. But this is like I'm kind of embracing all that all at once. So, it's pretty overwhelming.

[00:15:00]

It's like this idea that, oh, there's like gods up above and then maybe a god above that. And then there's like lower beings as well. And they're all energy. And to a degree, I believe all that stuff still... to a degree. But then there's like—I think life kind of trumps that, or like life is kind of like—what is tangible is just more real in some ways. It's like that should be your priority. But what—you know, the intangible became my priority.

And so, it's like, you can go through all kinds of things. Like, if we're going down the rabbit hole, it's just like, yeah, everything kind of came to life. You know, and pretty soon I'm talking to plants, and I'm talking to galactic beings and all of this other stuff. And it's just kind of like—yeah, you could say it got more intense. Because there's—you know, once you start, once your imagination kind of gets chained to this like, ooh, am I really feeling this? Or is this really being communicated to me? Or is my brain making up stories? I can't tell. I don't know what's real and what's not.

Because you're already dealing with stuff that's like kind of looser reality.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Ela Melo in a moment. As we go to break. Here's more from the new Rainbow Kitten Surprise album, *Love Hate Music Box*. A song called “Code Blue”.

Music: “Code Blue” from the album *Love Hate Music Box* by Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

When it's something strange

And it don't look good

Who you gonna call, babe?

Who you gonna turn to?

When you lost the pain

That became your truth

Who is it you are, babe?

Who do you turn into?

When the rules have changed

So, you play to lose

Did you make far, babe?

Did you start at all?

Burning blue smoke...

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Ela Melo from Rainbow Kitten Surprise. In this segment coming up here, we mention PHP and IOP. And let's unpack that acronym a little. That stands for Partial Hospitalization Program and Intensive Outpatient Program. These are arrangements where you receive care every weekday for a period of time, but you sleep at home. So, somewhere in between regular care and hospitalization.

Before the break, we were talking about a period in Ela's recent past where she struggled with what was real and what wasn't.

So, then what was the practicality of that? Like, how did that affect your work with the band? I don't know if you were touring or—

Ela Melo: Well, there wasn't a whole—I mean, you know mid-2020, you know, there's not a whole lot going on anywhere.

John Moe: Yeah, you're not playing shows.

Ela Melo: Yeah, you know. No, and so part of that—you know, we did a couple of live streams, but like—but for the most part, no. And you know, like the band is—you know, like I was in North Carolina at the time with my folks. And you know, everybody else was in Nashville, except for Bozz who lives in Winston-Salem—our guitarist and vocalist.

Yeah, so I'm kind of separate, and I'm kind of in a rural North Carolina a little bit. I mean, it's just outside of Raleigh, but like—you know, looking back at it— And I hope that I'm still answering your questions. And feel free to move me in any direction that you need if you're not feeling like you're getting what you're saying, what you're asking for.

(John affirms with a chuckle.)

You know what I mean?

John Moe: You're doing great.

Ela Melo: Well, so, what I was gonna say is like it's simple things. Like, I still go to Rolesville, North Carolina, and I still go on the back porch at night, and I still see the stars. And I'm like, wow, that's an incredible view, right? Because there's little light pollution out there, so it just really smacks you in the face. And having come from the city, you know, and not been in a more rural setting in a while, I think part of what hit me that night that I walked outside was just the majesty of the universe and how it's laid out in the night sky. And I was just like, wow, that's really cool. But you know, there's another part of my brain that was just kind of like, "You think that's free? You think you just get to go and enjoy a beautiful view like that? No, that's like—you gotta pay for that." And I don't know where that came from.

John Moe: How do you pay for that?

Ela Melo: Well, in my case, it was like doing like a lot of weird shit, like eating plants or like being aware of my heart racing or kind of nodding to different constellations and stuff. It was like—it was a weird thing. And it was just kind of like—I also got into—I don't want to say the wrong thing. Egyptian mythology at the time. 'Cause I was just kind of like, "Yo, I think these cats are onto something."

[00:20:00]

And you know, I got a Book of the Dead, and I went through it, and I was just kind of like, "Okay, some of this I resonate with." And it feels like they were looking at the stars too, like, "Hey, these aren't just like big balls of burning gas out there. This is—there's something to all this." You know, that there's a rhyme and reason to it.

John Moe: So, then nothing much was happening due to the pandemic around that part of 2020. Eventually things did, and you got back to work. Like, did you accept this as just your new reality? Or did you say, "This is a problem that I need to solve"?

Ela Melo: My reality, I mean, continued to evolve. And so, you know, it's like—you know, because part of it was being created, as all of our realities are being created, in my brain, right? Sometimes it was like, "Oh, this reality is—like, I can work with this." And sometimes it was very hard to navigate for the people around me and for myself. But, no. I mean, it went—I guess I expected somebody else to like tag team—you know, jump in if they thought that how I was living or whatever was a problem.

I don't know. People were for the most part like willing to kind of go on some of these journeys with me. You know, and I'd explain things that—it's like, what is mental illness? It's like, the thing is is like there's some of that stuff that, you know, quote/unquote was "communicated" to me. There's some of that stuff that like might be true actually. You know? And I kept—but it's just like—it's hard to see what is and what isn't when you're deep in it.

And so, yeah, I mean I went back to do my job, and I could do my job for the most part fine, until I couldn't. And—

John Moe: What did it look like when you couldn't?

Ela Melo: Oh, we were playing the second night of Red Rocks, and my body just stopped working, and I hit the floor.

John Moe: What was—tell me—walk me through that. How were you feeling? How did that evolve?

Ela Melo: I was feeling like—I was feeling the most euphoric I've ever felt in my entire life. I just felt the most loved and the most—it was incredible. It was like not even a sustainable kind of euphoria. I was bursting at the seams with it. And also just very humbled and very grateful that all these people had showed up to listen to my band play and to watch us perform. The whole night I was kind of wrestling with this vibe—you know, these vibes, these changing vibes and stuff. And I just—I wasn't sure, and I was just at the keys playing.

And then my body just wanted to play something different. And my voice didn't want to sing, and it just like—and I kept wanting to turn and to bow to the audience and just show how grateful I was. And it kind of overpowered me to where I just did that without even thinking or something. I remember thinking, “This is kind of weird that I'm doing this, but whatever.” Dissociation was what they would call it. I dissociated, and my body was doing stuff that my brain wasn't really here for. And at some point my body was just like, “Stop playing. Stop playing, stop playing.” And I was like, no, I got to finish this song. And so, my body just seized up, and I hit the floor.

John Moe: Mm. What happened then?

Ela Melo: Some folks came and, you know, sprinkled water on me, fanned me off. Then it was, you know, just seeing—'cause I came to pretty quickly. I couldn't tell you exactly how quickly, but you know. For me it felt like a lifetime, but I got up, and we finished the set where we played—we had to skip a couple songs, but we played the last song, you know. And I fell again during the last song. And that's when folks really started to kind of get worried about me.

John Moe: And then what followed that? Did you keep on playing shows, or did you get off the road?

Ela Melo: No, no, they came in. My manager and my tour manager and production manager and all—they all met with me at my hotel room the next day and were just like, “Hey, we're stopping the tour now. We're going to send you home and get you into treatment. 'Cause we're not sure what's happening, but something's up. And you're not—you're just not fit to tour right now.”

John Moe: Did you feel like something was wrong?

Ela Melo: I fought coming off the road, I'll tell you that. I did not want to stop the tour.

John Moe: Why?

Ela Melo: Because I love what I do, and I didn't want to let the fans down. And I was like, no, I'm good enough to finish this tour. Like, I can at least do that. I can do my job. I'm very proud of the fact that I can do my job under difficult circumstances.

[00:25:00]

And I have done so countless times.

John Moe: So, then the tour was off, and they encouraged you to get into treatment. Did you go into treatment?

Ela Melo: Yes, I did. I did.

John Moe: What did that look like?

Ela Melo: It's a crap shoot, man. A lot of places are not that great. It's hard to find good help; I'll just tell you that. For anybody who's looking for it, you gotta really dig.

John Moe: So, did you—what kind of treatment did you get into? And did it work? Was it good?

Ela Melo: Ooh, well—I mean, like... *(sighs)* I don't know if “sobered me up” is the right word, but like it seemed to do a thing for a little while. And things got bad again. You know, I was in treatment for—let's see, *(mumbling inaudible)*—about from roughly August 'til December.

John Moe: Inpatient treatment?

Ela Melo: And residential was...

John Moe: Residential? Sure, okay.

Ela Melo: Mm-hm. Yeah. Not for the whole—not for those whole four months. Some outpatient stuff. You know, which is like a step-down program is what they call it. You go to residential, and then you come out, and you go to—oof, I forget what even it is. Is it PHP?

John Moe: IOP?

(Ela confirms.)

Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Sort of a combination of inpatient and outpatient.

Ela Melo: Yeah, right. And, yeah, so I did that. And it seemed to, you know, help. You know, everybody was like, “Oh, you know, you're looking better. You're sounding better.” And then—

John Moe: How were you feeling?

Ela Melo: Uhh, I was okay. I felt like I had a better grasp on reality than at that point. You know, and part of that is like—you know, tour is just such a... it's such a different way to live. And it's so—it's hard, but it's also magical. And it's like—so, you can kind of get lost in the sauce there. Like, you know.

But it's like the reality of residential and my treatment afterwards, spending hours and hours talking in group therapies about whatever, you know, is more sobering than a tour with Rainbow Kitten Surprise. I'll tell you that. Just like on a basic level of what your stimulus is, what your stimuli are.

John Moe: Because it's just more mundane? More day-to-day?

Ela Melo: Mundane, yeah. Yeah. I mean, I was just like sitting there like playing with a deck of cards, just reorganizing them by suit and put it back and then mess them all up and do it again. I don't know. It was so boring. But you know, sometimes boring is exactly what you need, especially if you've been spun out. You know?

John Moe: Yeah. Was that where you were diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

Ela Melo: People would come and go on that diagnosis, man. It was so frustrating, because I would get the diagnosis, but then I would get no medication for it. And I don't know. I just don't know what happened. It's just not really—it's something that most people need to be medicated for who have it. I'm bipolar one with psychotic features, and I definitely need medication. (*Chuckles.*) You know, and it just wasn't—but I met so many people who were bipolar in these centers, you know. ‘Cause it didn't happen just the one time. It happened multiple times that I went to these, you know, treatment facilities.

You know, and finally I really had to spin out and then end up in a psych hospital. And that's when I got my diagnosis.

John Moe: Mm. What did the spinning out look like?

Ela Melo: I just started seeing shit again and started getting, you know, heavy communication from what I call the universe, you know. And you know, especially at that time. At that time, I would just say, “They're talking to me.” It's just “them”, this amorphous “them”. Which is kind of everybody and nobody, you know. I don't know. But that's how I described it to folks. And people would be like, “Oh shit, them. Okay. We got a problem,” kind of thing.

And so, we were about to play a show. And I was standing on stage in front of my Nord, which is a keyboard, and the lights were flashing and changing colors. And I asked my stage

manager, “Hey, are you seeing this?” And he said no. And I was like, “Well, we got a problem, because I am.”

And so, it had to get a little bit worse. And then people were just like, “We can't do this show, and Ela needs to fly back to treatment now.”

John Moe: Yeah. Was that a different kind of treatment that you flew back to?

Ela Melo: It was definitely a higher caliber of care and—you know.

[00:30:00]

And unfortunately you got to pay for stuff like that, you know, heavily. But you know, it turned out to be worth it in my case, ‘cause I got my life back, you know.

John Moe: What happened in that care that gave you your life back?

Ela Melo: Well, medication. Like I said, you know. I ended up in a psych hospital, and they got me on the right meds, the right cocktail. And you know, that cocktail had to evolve over time. Nothing's perfect, nothing is. But you know, they got it figured out. I had a really good doctor, Dr. Chan. You know, he just like kind of knew. He was like, “I diagnosed you in 30 seconds. I could just tell. I could just tell what it was.”

You know, and I was just like, “That's great.” And they put me on this med, and I took it for two days and I was like, “Whoa, do not take me off of this. This is working.” And I had never had that before. ‘Cause I had been diagnosed with depression and stuff. And you know, I'd been on some meds for that. But they kind of came and went in their usefulness to me. And I don't know.

John Moe: What happened to the things that you'd been seeing, that you'd been feeling? Like, did that kind of—like, I guess I want to call it a mystical experience. Did that go away?

Ela Melo: It just got way more manageable. I still think that there's magic in the universe in terms of like—you know, if you wish on a shooting star or something like that. Like, you know, there's something there. So, I still feel that, like there's something—almost like if you approach the world like a child, at least in your demeanor, that you'll see wonderful things.

John Moe: Sounds like you've made peace with that.

Ela Melo: Yeah. No, I did. Like, I had to accept that. I was just like, okay, maybe this happened, maybe it didn't, but it's a part of my experience. And I have to remember all of this was in my brain. You know, other people weren't seeing the things that I was seeing. Therefore it's in my brain. That doesn't make it less real. However, it does—my priorities shifted once things became more manageable to be like, well, what's a reality that we can agree on is happening? And that's the one I want to live in is the agreed upon reality. And that's harder to come by. (*Chuckles.*)

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Just ahead—in a time of uncertainty, Ela Melo sees at least one thing clearly: her gender identity.

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Ela Melo of Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

You came out as trans two years ago. Where did that coming out fit in with this cycle? You know, time-wise, where did this fit in?

Ela Melo: It kind of all started at the same time. Right around my 30th—or right around my 29th birthday. Which I guess was 2020. Yeah, it was just like—that's a whole story. But basically, you know, after about six months of—and it was all wrapped up in all of the star speak and whatever, what have you. You know, all of that stuff. And you know, but I just like—when I kind of came out of that for a second and just like, okay, maybe this isn't all real. Maybe this is in my head. The one thing that did stick out and was like, “Now this I know is real for sure though,” is that I am a trans woman. That I have no doubts, you know.

And it's hard to have no doubts when you are not your assigned gender. It's like—because other people doubt for you in some ways. Some folks do, anyway. Yeah, it was all wrapped up. You can't separate any of it. But I came out of the other side, you know, like feeling better at some point. It was that for the first time that I ever went to a psych hospital. I came out of it, and I was just like, “You know what?” A lot of craziness happened going in there and then being there and then coming out. But something about being in there the first time that I went and just talking to folks who had it worse than I did put things in perspective to me. And it just made it kind of like, okay, well I don't know what real reality is, but I know it's not quite the one I've been living.

But I do know that my real reality is that I'm trans. And how to articulate that when I really didn't have trans friends, and I really didn't have—I'd never been around—

[00:35:00]

I mean, I had one. But like, you know, it's just like—even for them, it was hard to articulate it. Like, they're going through their own journey. And so, yeah, sorry. I feel like I'm over talking now. And—yeah.

John Moe: No, this is—it's really good insight. Did coming out and sort of saying this publicly, did that make things easier and healthier for you mentally? Or not so much?

Ela Melo: Always does, always—in my experience, for anybody who is— Because it's just it gets it out of your head. Because, you know—because before you come out, you know, you are kind of trapped. Lord knows the mind is not always the nicest place to live. You know? And so, the more you can get people around you who are supporting the reality that you want to live in and the person that you want to see in the mirror every day—and I've had so much

help from so many great people along the way for that. You know, teaching me how to handle hair, do makeup, that sort of thing. Like, things that are now like part of my toolkit in the way that I express myself and in the way that I want to be seen, you know?

John Moe: So, you find a stronger place, I guess, a healthier place with your mental health through a lot of help that you received and through some trial and error. And then you set about making this music for your work that becomes *Love Hate Music Box*. Tell me about the role of your mental health journey in making this music, in writing this music.

Ela Melo: Well, what's interesting is I kinda—I had some pretty—I call it writer's block, you know. I don't know what it was exactly. But you know, I just wasn't able to finish songs. And then 2021—or 2020, no, sorry. What year are we even in? Sorry.

John Moe: 2024.

Ela Melo: Last January—2023—things started to come together with my producer, Daniel Tashian, and our other producer/engineer, Konrad Snyder. And we kind of got back to basics, songwriting 101. And it was just like, alright, let's just get a verse, let's get a chorus, let's get a verse, let's get a chorus, let's get a bridge, and chorus, and done.

And I was just like, “But it's way more complicated than that!”

But they were like, “It doesn't have to be. And that's what we need to do. So, let's do that.”

And so I was like, “Okay, cool. I think I can do that.”

And so, I just—something in me just clicked. And we just started making a song a day, you know, in the studio. And we racked up about eight or nine songs. And things got bad for me again around that time. I had a psychotic break which was induced, you know, by overuse of stimulants. And ended up in a mental hospital again, you know, just as I was finding my footing with songwriting. You know, at this point that was the second time that I was in a psych hospital, you know. And I'm just like, “I never want to come back here, but like—”

And so, things just kind of got better, got worse, got better, got worse until they got real bad again. So, the first like eight or nine songs—I'm just trying to answer your question now. The first eight or nine songs were just the joy of writing. They're pure just the joy of doing this, of honing my craft and stuff. And some—you know, there's some skeletons in there too, and some darker tunes and stuff. You know, “Low As We Go”. You know, “John Woo” to a degree is talking about the mental health struggles, but yeah.

And then I went into treatment for a prolonged time, and then came back in August, and that's when the juices really started flowing. And we really just started knocking out a song every day. And some of those made it, and some of those didn't. But I had been writing while I was in treatment as well. It just felt like we were out of the woods. And so, we just started playing around with it and just making like—you know, I don't know, just like happy music. Which I don't know if I've ever made before this record in some ways. Yeah. Even like upbeat songs are still like sad. And I try to infuse a little bit of melancholy in anything that I do. ‘Cause I

just think that it's—one, it's a reality check. And I just, I'm like—I don't know. I'm a weird person. I like when it rains, and I like to be sad sometimes.

John Moe: Well, sadness in music is a time-honored tradition. (*Laughs.*)

(*Ela agrees.*)

That goes for a lot of people. Were you trying to tell the story of this mental health trip that you've been on?

[00:40:00]

Ela Melo: Oh, I don't think I was trying to tell anything, in terms of like—as far as like, I wasn't—I was just making the music that was coming out naturally is what I'm saying. There wasn't any—there wasn't an agenda that I was like— Which I have had before. You know, like *How To* maybe was a little bit more like “this is the picture I want to paint”. With this one it's just like—I feel like this is just paint by numbers. You know, like my—just my subconscious was just coming up with this stuff that was like—

You know, sometimes it was talking about seeing stuff on the walls, and sometimes it's talking about going clubbing with your friends and like—and all of that is part of my lived experience. And sometimes at the same time.

John Moe: I'm looking at your tour dates right now, starting—and we're talking at the beginning of August. And you are going on the road for it looks like two and a half/three months. Pretty intense tour. What steps are you taking to take care of yourself, to stay healthy, to make sure that this goes well in every way?

Ela Melo: You know, I'm very fortunate to have a great team around me. Folks that check in on me. You know, friends, paid professionals, to be frank. And also, you know, family and every—like, just I got a lot of eyes on me. And ears and all this other stuff. So, when I'm—if I start to stray from the beaten path, so to speak, it's like I find out pretty quickly that folks are concerned with— Like, you know, I text people. There's people that I text, who are on my team, when I wake up and when I go to bed and everything in between. You know what I mean? It's very different than life used to look for me. It's pretty regulated by me and other folks.

So, you know, if what you're asking is like what steps are you taking to take care of yourself, it's like, as far as—nobody needs to be worried about me outside of the folks who already are. 'Cause it's already a lot of people who have a vested interest in me and making sure that I'm doing well.

John Moe: Well, it's nice that it's—it doesn't sound like they're worried about you so much as just they're vigilant.

(*Ela repeats the word.*)

You know, there's a plan. Yeah.

Ela Melo: Burning candles for sure. Yeah. Yeah.

John Moe: Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) Well, Ela Melo, thank you so much for sharing your story and for making the music that you do. I think even just talking about it, and people who might've had similar experiences hearing this podcast, it's going to make them feel stronger and less alone. And I think that's wonderful.

Ela Melo: Awesome. I hope so. I hope so.

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song fades in briefly but is quickly replaced by “Sickset”.

John Moe: Let's go out on a bit more from Rainbow Kitten Surprise, a song called “Sickset”.

Music: “Sickset” from the album *Love Hate Music Box* by Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

You make everything gold

And me, froze in your pockets

Snakes and planes and favorite things

I'm all I have to offer

My feet, they see the pavement

Thank god it feels amazing

I'm blowing through my savings

So, holler at me, baby

(Music fades out.)

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

John Moe: We made this episode, we make all of our episodes, in an effort to help people—to help them understand the human mind a little bit better, to help them feel a little less alone in the world, especially if they have complicated minds. To do that costs money. It costs money to put on the show. And people send us money, and we really appreciate that.

If you haven't already made your donation to *Depresh Mode*, it's easy to do. Just go to MaximumFun.org/join, and then find a level that works for you. That's up to you how much you want to give. And then pick *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. It's that easy, and that's how we can keep making these shows. It's just as simple as that. So, again, MaximumFun.org/join. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. All of that also helps get the show out into the world where it can help people.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States and Canada by calling or texting 988. It's free, it's available 24/7.

Our Instagram and Twitter are both [@DepreshPod](https://twitter.com/DepreshPod). Our newsletter, *Depresh Mode* newsletter, is on Substack. Search that up. I'm on Twitter and Instagram, [@JohnMoe](https://twitter.com/JohnMoe). Join our Preshies group on Facebook. A lot of good discussion happening over there, people getting together and sharing stories and sharing tips and sharing just the commiserations of your fellow human being. Sometimes even talking about the show. I hang out there as well. So, join us over there. Preshies. Search that up on Facebook. Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

[00:45:00]

Hi, credits listeners. No, really, I am glad you're here. We need you here. We've got work to do. And you've already done so much work, I know. But we have more work to do. And we have play to do, and we need you here for all of that.

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

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

JD: Hi there. My name is John Duval. My friends call me JD, and I'm from Columbus, Ohio. I just want you to know, I'm really thankful for you. I'm glad you're here.

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!