

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY

CHAPTER 10: GASOLINE

WITNESS DOCS

TESS BARKER: Before Britney had her rights stripped away, before *FreeBritney* became a worldwide phenomenon, Britney Spears was known as America's princess of party.

ARCHIVAL TAPE: Britney Spears giggling with some girlfriends on the way out to the club

TESS: This is paparazzi footage of Britney in her twenties, running amok in Los Angeles. In this clip, she's giggling with some friends as they head to the clubs.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): What baby? With cheese. A coke.

BABS GRAY: And this is her ordering some late night fast food while wearing a fur coat and sunglasses. Britney was doing the things a lot of young people do, going out, drinking, having fun. But she was doing it all on this epic, super star scale. She hit exclusive parties with Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan. Here's Paris with Britney and the paps.

PARIS HILTON (ARCHIVAL): Open the door, please? [commotion]

TESS: Britney would curse out the paparazzi when they got too in her face.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I'm outside my goddamn home you stupid fuck! Move!!

TESS: Or she'd invite them to hang out.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Party at my house! [paps cheer]

UNIDENTIFIED PAPARAZZO: Thank you Britney, we love you Britney.

UPBEAT MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: In Britney's few years of adult freedom, she lived life at full speed. Literally. She always seemed to be driving back and forth across the giant expanse that is Los Angeles. She turned the city into her playground. And she made a few questionable decisions along the way. She went commando while wearing super short dresses. She hooked up with Criss Angel. Yes, the magician Criss Angel.

TESS: But these quote "mistakes" are what made Britney, Britney. Because all of our choices, good or bad, are what make us who we are.

BABS: And we should be allowed to make mistakes shouldn't we? To occasionally do the thing that's not the best choice - eat leftover pizza for breakfast. Spend your rent money on a new tattoo. Hook up with a guy named Stu who works in a potion shop. We've all done it. Right?

TESS: Our own decisions are what make life meaningful. And mistakes teach us what to avoid in the future. They give us our best stories... No one has an amazing anecdote about the time they drank some tea and went to bed early.

BABS: Who was Britney's dad, or anyone else, to say what mistakes Britney was allowed to make? Why do some people get to make mistakes, while others are seen as incapable to choose for themselves?

TESS: We're getting into thorny questions like these in this episode of Toxic, our last one. And we're talking about power. What does Britney's story have to tell us about who gets power in our society and why?

MUSIC FADES

SARA LUTERMAN: Britney Spears is easily the most famous person under guardianship or conservatorship, and so it's really -- I don't know if exciting is the right word because it's tragic, I wish this wasn't being done to her -- but it is an opportunity to bring a huge spotlight to a major issue that impacts some of the least privileged members of our community.

TESS: This is Sara Luterman, a journalist whose work focuses on disability rights. We wanted to talk to Sara because she's written several pieces about Britney's situation as it relates to the disabled community - a community that Sara herself is a part of.

SARA: So I guess something you should know about autism is like sometimes we get really into doing the same thing over and over again or listening to the same song over and over again. And I've basically had "Toxic" on, on a loop.

BABS: Sara wasn't drawn to Britney's case because of her music. In fact, she wasn't ever really a fan. Sara's interested in Britney's story because it's bringing the issue of conservatorships into public conversation - although Sara says the way Britney's case is talked about can often be problematic.

SARA: A lot of people seemed to not be sure if Britney was really disabled or not, and I don't think that that question really matters so much. Like, I think if Britney had a substantial disability, she would still deserve more civil rights than she currently has. I think the assumption that this is a good option for those kind of people is pretty ableist. I find the implication that she's not really disabled and therefore shouldn't be under guardianship, frustrating because actually no one should be under guardianship. Or at least, way fewer people should be under guardianship.

TESS: For many people with disabilities, turning 18 means entering a guardianship. It's common practice for schools to encourage parents of disabled children to pursue guardianship for their kids as soon as they become legal adults.

BABS: But many disability rights activists, including Sara, feel this is far too drastic of an approach.

SARA: Guardianship and conservatorship in general is basically a stripping of legal personhood. There are obviously people who need a substantial amount of support who may not be able to, you know, manage their own money in a way that is safe so they won't get taken advantage of. Those are real issues that people need real support on. But guardianship and conservatorship are really like a nuclear option. You press a button and just everything's gone.

BABS: So what alternatives *are* there to conservatorships? Well, advocates like Sara point to something called Supported Decision Making -- basically a system where a person with a disability relies on a trusted group of advisors to help them make important decisions. Options like this keep people *out* of the court system, and preserve something Sara says is key:

SARA: People in guardianship don't really have consent in a way that is conceptualized for most people. Their consent has basically been transposed to another person who's supposed to act in their best interest. So, it's very dehumanizing.

TESS: Acting in someone's best interest. That's an idea that comes up over and over again in discussions about conservatorship. Acting in someone's best interest sounds like a good thing, right? But when you break it down, forcing someone to do what *you* think is best for them can mean robbing them of some really important liberties.

SARA So, like, it's in your best interest to eat a salad. It's in your best interest to not be late for work. But what you want to do might not be the same thing as what's best for you. Those are two different concepts. There should be a right to make bad decisions. And it's something that non-disabled people are allowed to do all the time. But disabled people aren't.

MUSIC POSTS, ENDS

TESS: This is what's been taken from Britney - 13 years worth of making her own decisions, both good and bad. It's ironic that the quote unquote "bad decisions" Britney made when she was young — The Vegas elopement, the partying, her "Starbucks chic" street style — were so heavily policed by the people around her. Because Britney's edgy rock star attitude was exactly the thing that endeared Britney to me and so many of her fans.

MEGAN RADFORD: When she wore her wedding dress to go shopping, just little things like that where I was just like this woman is a total badass, she's not afraid to be who she is. She's not afraid to put her real self out there.

BABS: This is Megan Radford. You may remember Megan as one of the FreeBritney supporters in episode one - who was there outside the courthouse during Britney's testimony. And, yes, Britney *did* wear the wedding dress from her and K-fed's nuptials, six months after finalizing her divorce, while she was car shopping with the new dude she was seeing. I mean truly, a legend, an icon, an inspiration.

MEGAN: She was just like this happy spot in my life. And I loved her. But then it was really when she started struggling that I actually started feeling like I was connected to her from a soul perspective, because I had undiagnosed depression and anxiety for a lot of my adolescent years and I didn't understand what I was feeling. And then she started having public struggles and it made me realize that I wasn't alone.

MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: Megan doesn't just love Britney, she's also a key organizer and important voice in the FreeBritney movement. And she's been in the FreeBritney game longer than most.

MEGAN: I was a part of the original movement in 2009.

TESS: Yep, the term "Free Britney" has been around since 2009. It was originally used on message boards by fans who were critical of Britney's conservatorship. Megan was one of those fans.

MEGAN: I bought a pink T-shirt and some black iron on letters and I wrote "Free Britney" on it and I wore it to her concert, which is kind of funny because now I would not attend the concert to support the conservators. [laughs] But at the time I didn't know. I mean, I was in my early 20s.

BABS: Megan first learned of Britney's conservatorship soon after it was put into place. And right away, it struck Megan as really suspect, because her brother, who has a developmental disability, is in a similar arrangement.

MEGAN: So my brother, he walks and he has some speech, but he is cognitively probably still in elementary school. I think because of my brother, I had a first hand look at what a conservatorship is meant for and how it's supposed to operate and how it's supposed to be a beneficial thing in someone's life.

TESS: When Megan's brother turned 18, he entered a guardianship under the care of Megan's mom. Megan says that when she found out Britney was in a conservatorship, similar to what her brother was in, she immediately compared their situations.

MEGAN: And it was really a moment where I was like, “What the heck?” Like, why would something that's appropriate for my brother, who literally would not be able to feed, clothe or shelter himself without it, be appropriate for the biggest pop star in America?

BABS: Megan feels that her brother's guardianship is ultimately a helpful arrangement for him. Her mother takes care of his day to day needs and makes sure he gets exercise and participates in activities with friends.

MEGAN: Without a guardianship in place, he wouldn't be able to live a fulfilling life.

TESS: But Britney? Megan felt like Britney's conservatorship was unnecessary, even harmful. So after we released the FreeBritney episode of Britney's Gram in 2019, Megan was galvanized. She began flying out to Los Angeles from Oklahoma every few months to attend rallies. Pretty soon, she was deeply involved in *organizing* rallies along with other people like Leanne Simmons and Kevin Wu. Here's Megan at a FreeBritney rally in November 2020.

MEGAN (ARCHIVAL): [over a megaphone] Well, it's great to have you all here today. We appreciate all the support from all over the world. Thank you to everyone for coming. Britney obviously means so much to each and every one of us. [fades]

BABS: Megan helps run the website FreeBritney.Army, which posts a ton of information for those who want to take action. Things like: how to run your own FreeBritney rally, how to file a formal complaint against people like Sam Ingham or Judge Brenda Penny, and how to write letters to public officials to encourage conservatorship reform.

MEGAN: I think we're just trying to come at it from a lot of different angles because we may have all started this fight for Britney Spears specifically, but this issue is much, much larger than that.

TESS: The FreeBritney movement has started advocating on behalf of all kinds of conservatorship abuse cases. Megan and the other organizers see the rallies at Britney's hearings as educational opportunities. Their goal is to spread the word to Britney fans about less high profile cases.

MEGAN: We've asked, you know, people who have been personally affected by conservatorship abuse to join us and speak and we ask other FreeBritney advocates to speak and things like that. Kevin, Leanne and I are kind of part of a coalition of probate reform advocates and we meet biweekly. In those meetings, they really strategize on who has court cases coming up, how we can support each other, what action we can take with the legislation.

MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: People like Megan have helped make Free Britney a full-blown bipartisan political issue. In a collaboration that seems less likely than Taylor Swift and Kanye West, Elizabeth Warren *and* Ted Cruz have come together to agree that we, as a country, have gotta free Britney. Lawmakers at all levels of government are starting to push for conservatorship reform. Here's California Assemblyman Evan Low addressing the state legislature in May 2021.

EVAN LOW: Some would say the current political system is a Circus. It is our Prerogative as legislators to help provide oversight of the fiduciaries bureau. We are, of course, Lucky to be in this position to advocate for this cause. Please help us make our current laws Stronger Than Yesterday.

BABS: In many states, advocates are pushing legislation that would give conservatees more freedoms like the ability to choose their own attorney or decide who they visit with. The international attention on *Britney's* case has put a spotlight on the need for reform.

TESS: Seeing FreeBritney go from a fan movement to a worldwide phenomenon that's actually helping change conservatorship laws is...surreal to say the least. *I* still remember in 2018, making my first calls to conservatee rights advocacy groups. They seemed shocked that someone wanted to report on conservatorships at all. Now, FreeBritney is everywhere. We've seen cocktails named FreeBritney. A weed-strain. A minor league baseball team had a "FreeBritney" themed game. Sometimes, when I look at how big this has all gotten, it feels like I'm watching a movie about someone else's life.

BABS: Elon Musk has come out for FreeBritney. So have Madonna, Missy Elliot, and Miley Cyrus.

MILEY CYRUS (ARCHIVAL): [chanting on stage during "Party in the USA"] Free Britney!!! Free, free, free, free Britney!

TESS: All this energy and worldwide attention have made Megan and a lot of other FreeBritney activists hopeful that their efforts will pay off.

BABS: Say this happened? Say, like tomorrow, you know, the conservatorship was terminated. How would you feel? What would you do?

MEGAN: Oh, I'd probably fly into L.A. to be with all of you guys. We've joked several times that we're going to plan a freedom party when it does happen, and it will be an amazing moment, but then I also plan to continue my advocacy for probate court reform as a whole.

TESS: So is this, like, a lifelong mission for you at this point?

MEGAN: [laughs] Yeah.

TESS: [giggles]

MEGAN: I'm committed. I mean, Britney is my number one. But I really think that after learning all the things that I've learned about the corruption in the probate court system. I don't know how anyone could know that information and not try to effect change.

SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: I can honestly say that I'm now passionate about conservatorship reform. This is just one aspect of my current life that I never saw coming. People these days like to say to me - wow, if you could meet your 15 year old self right now, wouldn't your teenage mind be blown? And to that I'm like - my teenage self would probably say what the hell are you talking about? What is a conservatorship? And did your mom let you pierce your belly button yet?

TESS: Obviously if Britney gets free, we'll be going to that party with Megan and the other Free Britney folks. We've hit gay bars with them before, and lemme tell you, if you haven't watched multiple people spontaneously break into the Slave 4 U choreo, you haven't lived.

BABS: But as much as making this podcast has been about getting our girl Britney the justice she deserves, for us, it's also been about uncovering what got us here in the first place. The dark truths that have allowed Britney's situation to persist.

MUSIC FADES OUT

MIDROLL BREAK

TESS: What drew you to Britney's story?

RONAN FARROW: I'm an attorney, and I as a reporter gravitate towards stories where there is some injustice and some mystery. So probably some of the same qualities that drew you to this story.

TESS: This is investigative reporter Ronan Farrow. In July 2021, he and reporter Jia Tolentino published an expose in the New Yorker titled "Britney Spears' Conservatorship Nightmare." In addition to his deep knowledge about Britney's story, Ronan also has a unique vantage point when it comes to power and how it operates. He has published stories that have helped bring down abusers like Harvey Weinstein.

BABS: Ronan also has personal experience with fame, secrecy, and family dynamics. He grew up in a Hollywood family: His mother is actress Mia Farrow and his father, Woody Allen has been the center of an assault scandal, prompted by accusations from Ronan's older sister, Dylan Farrow.

RONAN: I know a thing or two about families being torn apart by fame. There is the added dimension in Britney Spears's case of a family torn apart by her wealth and the struggle for control over it. But, you know, the combination of that battle and those complicated family dynamics and her extreme, extraordinary fame, I think created a situation where you had an apparently kind, compassionate person completely cut off from any friends or loved ones who could really look out for her and be an anchor. And that's a devastating thing to unravel.

BABS: Ronan and Jia's New Yorker piece included a number of shocking revelations about Britney's case - including that Britney tried to officially report herself as a victim of conservatorship abuse, just a day before her open court testimony in June 2021.

RONAN: It was striking to me to learn that she went to law enforcement before she spoke in court.

TESS: The morning of Britney's testimony, paparazzi photos circulated online of Britney leaving a police station near her home. She wore sunglasses, a button up, and a long grey cardigan. As she walked back to her car, she looked nervous. Determined. When we saw the photos the morning of her hearing, things suddenly felt heightened. Even more urgent.

RONAN: She went in, and then when she couldn't get seen in person, she called the 911 dispatch center. So this was someone who was fiercely motivated in making her complaint public and formalizing it in all sorts of ways.

TESS: What do you think it says about the severity of her situation, that she went to the police before she knew she was going to make that testimony?

RONAN: I think that it certainly suggests a high level of functionality.

MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: Ronan's worked on many high-profile stories involving crime and corruption. He is used to dealing with sources who are scared to speak, but Ronan says even he was struck by the level of secrecy around Britney's story.

RONAN: I suppose going in, I hadn't fully clocked the extent to which sources around this viewed the camp and Spears's management and even Jamie Spears as real threats, the extent to which people felt intimidated. There were people who were really convinced that if they went on the record complaining about this or shining a light on it, their careers in the entertainment industry would suffer.

BABS: One of the first things you learn in Los Angeles, besides "never find a roommate on Craigslist," is that you are replaceable. If you complain about your treatment at a job, or question the authority of someone above you, there's someone at the Greyhound bus station waiting to take your spot. If you want something badly enough, you'll suck it up. And if you suck it up long enough, if you make it to your goal - whether it's dancing behind Britney Spears on stage, doing her makeup, or designing her stage lights - you'll do a lot to keep that job. Including turning a blind eye. And this is how the cycle of intimidation and silence keeps going. Keeps stories like Britney's under wraps.

TESS: When we were still in the early days of the FreeBritney explosion and trying to figure out how to get this show made, someone close to Britney, someone who's very powerful in this industry, threatened to ruin our careers because they were upset we were making a project that

was critical of Britney's conservatorship. They basically took the hack route of saying we'd never work in this town again. And, as much as we'd like to namecheck that individual right now, the reality is - that person could end our careers.

BABS: By the way, that person came out for FreeBritney. You know, as soon as it was trendy.

TESS: We've spoken with lots of co-workers of Britney's who are afraid to come on record because their careers may suffer. But also, we've spoken with people who aren't in entertainment, who are scared that speaking about Britney will jeopardize their safety.

BABS: Even after all this explosive reporting and after she spoke in court, we still find that there are plenty of people who we speak with who are still scared of coming forward. Do you think there's something particular about Britney's story?

RONAN: I do think that there is still too much of a veil of secrecy. I think that part of what allowed some of the potential injustices to flourish around this was too much secrecy. And it allowed, I think, even people on the inside to tell themselves a story about what they were doing in maintaining and being a part of this conservatorship that they weren't really forced to question until now. And I think we're still living in sort of the ruins of that structure of secrecy where, you know, there was an easy narrative presented for why this had to be the way that she was controlled.

BABS: That narrative Ronan's referring to has, for a long time, been basically that Britney needs a conservatorship because she has mental health issues, and because she has mental health issues, it would be a violation of her medical privacy to be open about what's going on with the conservatorship.

RONAN: It creates these agonizing Catch-22s around conservatorship issues where the conservatee is often unable to transparently make the case for their freedom. And the conservators often have sort of a convenient excuse for airtight secrecy because they're respecting someone's medical privacy, and they don't want to damage the conservatee's reputation.

TESS: Another way that we've seen silence perpetuated around Britney's situation is via the use of non-disclosure agreements, or NDAs. NDAs are legally binding confidentiality agreements.

BABS: Like we've mentioned, many of the sources we've spoken with are on NDAs. And that makes them scared to talk publicly. They seem to think that speaking out would mean total financial ruin.

TESS: I do want to talk more about NDAs. From a legal perspective and in your own experience, have you encountered a lot of people who have faced repercussions for breaking an NDA, or is that sort of like-

RONAN: No!

TESS: -a shadow specter that's just used on people?

RONAN: It happens, to be clear, of course. It does happen, but it is certainly not widespread in my experience.

BABS: Ronan says that, basically, if you've already committed some kind of heinous activity that's outed by someone who is breaking their NDA, trying to pursue legal action against that whistleblower is not a good look.

TESS: But it's not just acquaintances and coworkers under NDAs who've been silent about Britney's conservatorship all these years. Britney's family has, too. Even Britney's mom, Lynne Spears, has been oddly quiet about Britney's situation for pretty much all of the conservatorship.

RONAN: She was not a fierce advocate for her daughter early on. She was very careful and very quiet. And I think that that's the way that she has dealt with all of these complicated situations for a very long time.

BABS: Lynne has not escaped the scrutiny of the FreeBritney movement - many people have filled up Lynne's instagram posts with comments, such as "You had 13 years to save her and you did nothing," or simply just a bunch of snake emojis. Lynne also lives in a home that Britney purchased, and is maintained by Britney's conservatorship. So although she may not be making the paychecks that Jamie has as conservator, Lynne has still benefited financially from Britney.

TESS: Ronan and Jia did get a brief quote from Lynne for their piece, in which she admitted to being "good at deflecting." Ronan says he views Lynne as another tragic figure in this story.

RONAN: The portrait that emerges of Lynne, when you talk to people around this family is one of a woman who has endured a lot of tough things, was in a relationship that by many accounts was at the very least emotionally abusive, has coped with that again, by many accounts, by being sort of very passive and non confrontational.

SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC ENTERS

TESS: There have been plenty of factors that have led to complacency around Britney's situation. One of them is the simple fact of Britney's gender. We live in a culture that diminishes feminine things. Feminine movies are just chick flicks. Feminine magazines are just guilty pleasures. And feminine people like Britney are just blonde hair and perfectly flat abs. A product.

RONAN: I think without a doubt, Britney Spears, being a woman, played a huge role in the way in which this went unquestioned for so long, we can all obviously point to any number of male celebrities who have gone off the rails, who have struggled with mental health issues, who have not been treated in the way that Britney Spears was treated, who haven't been deprived of their rights in the way that she has. She was someone that society got too comfortable with thinking of as an object who is controlled by others.

SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC CONTINUES

B: Who gets power in this world, and how? How much power did Britney hold in 2008 - when she had a hit record out, when she was a 20-something international icon with millions of dollars to her name -- and why was that power so easily taken away from her and given to a man she didn't even want in her home? We still find these questions really hard to answer.

TESS: Jamie Spears was nothing without Britney Spears. He didn't have his own career. He didn't have his own power. He took power that was Britney's away from her. Just in your opinion, how was he able to do that? What I guess what in our society do you think allowed that to happen in plain view?

RONAN: I think Britney's own testimony is incredibly compelling when she talks about him sort of getting off on controlling a powerful person. None of us is in that relationship and none of us can know how fair that characterization is. And I'm sure Jamie Spears would dispute it vigorously. But it's relevant to consider that that's how he's made her feel. And I think there was this perfect storm of factors that allowed that to happen and to continue year after year.

TESS: You said online that Britney's story was one of the saddest stories you've ever reported -- and you've reported on some pretty heavy topics. What made you say that about Britney's story?

RONAN: The fact that she said in court, I was afraid to speak about this stuff earlier because I thought people would make fun of me and they'd laugh and they'd say, she's crazy. She has everything. She's Britney Spears. I'm paraphrasing, obviously, but for me, that line and the way in which it reflects how kind of trapped she has felt. That's devastating.

MUSIC FADES OUT

RONAN: And you know, you watch "Chaotic" or any of those earlier docs and you see that she's had her moments of living her life too, thank goodness. But it's sad to think that she maybe, over the years of the conservatorship, has become so constrained that she really doesn't have people left with whom to do that.

TESS: In their reporting, Ronan and Jia describe Britney in her early 20s, during the few years she was a free adult. when she had the chance to do, you know, that early 20s stuff we heard about earlier. They write, quote: "Spears blew off steam by partying: she smoked weed, used cocaine, took Molly with her dancers and jumped into the Mediterranean Sea."

RONAN: People are allowed legally to self-sabotage, and they're allowed to spiral and to struggle. And you know, it's one thing if someone is hurting someone else, but it really struck me that there was never anyone who presented any evidence that Britney Spears was a danger to anyone else.

TESS: After we read your New Yorker piece, all of us were like, I'm so glad Britney got to do molly and swim in the Mediterranean for once in her life.

RONAN: I know, girl, you deserve that.

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: How would Britney's life look today if, back in 2008, she'd been allowed to figure life out for herself? If, when her dad tried to get a conservatorship without a capacity declaration, the judge had said no? If Britney had been allowed to hire a lawyer who would actually fight for her, right away?

TESS: Britney Spears was 26 years old when she lost her freedom. She had endless possibilities in front of her. She could have spent a few more years partying and stealing boys' fedoras in nightclubs before getting way too into juice cleanses and wellness. She could have continued to hang out with Sam Lutfi until she got annoyed with him and changed her number. She could have taken a decade-long break from the music industry, then come back with an album of mid-tempo about finding herself. Or, she could have moved back to Louisiana to spend her days shopping at Target and running around with her kids.

BABS: If the people in Britney's life had never engaged in that tug of war for control, if that battle had never made its way from Britney's Hollywood Hills home to the Stanley Mosk courthouse, we might not be here asking "what if" and imagining what might have been, all these years later. Instead, what became of Britney Spears - the person, the artist, the brand - all of that would've been this woman's choice.

BRITNEY SPEARS (ARCHIVAL, FROM "CHAOTIC"): People can take everything away from you, but they can never take away your truth. But the question is, can you handle it? Can you handle my truth? Can you? I don't knowwww, hahahaha.

CREDITS

BABS: OK, it's thank you time. A giant final thank you to our amazing team at Witness Docs. We love you so much and we're so grateful to have worked with you. Abigail Keel, Kevin "K-Tid" Tidmarsh, Gianna Palmer, Kameel Stanley, Casey Holford and Peter Clowney. And Toxic is written and hosted by me, Babs Gray.

TESS: And me, Tess Barker! Reach out to us with your questions and comments at britnepod@stitcher.com Or get in touch on social @britneysgram. Find transcripts for all our episodes at witnesspodcasts.com.

BABS: And subscribe to Toxic: The Britney Spears Story wherever you listen to podcasts.

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