Max's Song

26 Mar, 2026

The place is half-full, and I'm half-working, half-staring at a wall when the opening synth line threads through the room. That pulsing, driving riff. Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill." I feel it before I recognize it. Before anything like a thought arrives, my body goes warm. An involuntary smile spreads across my face.

I sit with it for a second. This song matters to me. Why? I didn't grow up on Kate Bush. I couldn't have named this track three years ago. But it hits me now with the force of something personal, something lived, and I know immediately why. A redheaded girl in a fictional Indiana town running for her life, searching desperately for something to anchor her back to her friends, her memories, her small-town world. Though she's wearing headphones, we hear the song right along with her. We hear it for her. *Stranger Things* did this to me. *Stranger Things* did this to all of us.

And then my brain does what my brain does.

What a beautiful song. I always thought it was too intense. Too haunting. Now I love it. When did that change? Oh, Max. That's when it changed. God, Max was great. That whole season was great. This song must have exploded. People must have gone insane. The stream numbers must be obscene. How much money is Kate Bush making off this? A lot, right? No, she's probably not making anything. The label probably owns it all and she's getting scraps. That's how it works. Mostly. Although... maybe not. Kate Bush is a badass. Was a badass. Is a badass? I don't even know if she's still alive. She's still alive, right? She has to be. Maybe she held onto her rights. I hope she did. Wait, when did this song even come out? The mid-'80s? Forty years ago? Could that be right? What must it feel like to have something you made in your twenties become the most-played song on the planet four decades later? There has to be a story here.

There's always a story.

There is. And it's wilder than I expected.

"Running Up That Hill" was written in a single evening in the summer of 1983 by a 27-year-old woman whose career, by most conventional measures, was over.

Kate Bush had been famous in England since she was 19, when "Wuthering Heights" went to No. 1 and made her the first female artist to top the UK charts with a self-written song. By her mid-twenties she'd released four albums, performed on every major British television show, and developed a reputation as one of the most original artists of her generation. Then she released *The Dreaming* in 1982, and the whole thing fell apart. The album was so aggressively weird that by 1983 the British press had more or less written her off. She retreated to her parents' farmhouse in rural Kent. Built a 48-track recording studio in a barn behind the house. And then disappeared.

What she was doing in that barn was writing the album that would become *Hounds of Love*, now widely considered her masterpiece. "Running Up That Hill" was the first song she composed for it, and it came fast. A single night. The concept was simple and strange. A song about empathy between lovers, the wish to literally swap places with the person you love so you could understand what they feel.

She called it "A Deal with God."

Her label, EMI, lost their minds. Radio stations in Italy, Ireland, France, Australia, and at least ten other countries would refuse to play a song with God in the title, the executives said. Bush fought them. She lost. The single was released as "Running Up That Hill," with the parenthetical "(A Deal with God)" surviving only on the album tracklist. Bush has said in every interview since that the name change was something she always regretted.

The sound of the thing was unlike anything else on the radio in 1985. Built on a Fairlight CMI synthesizer using a sampled cello patch, programmed LinnDrum beats, and Bush's vocal suspended on this eerie minor seventh, it was hypnotic and unsettling and propulsive all at once. She wrote, produced, and arranged the entire track herself. Her partner at the time, Del Palmer, engineered it. Nobody else was involved.

When it came out on August 5, 1985, it peaked at No. 3 in the UK (blocked from the top by UB40 and Madonna) and No. 30 on the Billboard Hot 100. Respectable. Not historic. *NME* and *Melody Maker* both ranked it among the top three tracks of the year. *Hounds of Love* entered the UK Albums Chart at No. 1. But in America, Kate Bush remained what she had always been. A cult artist, beloved by a small number of people, unknown to almost everyone else.

That's where the song sat for 37 years. A deep cut for initiates. A song that showed up on "Best of the '80s" lists compiled by people with good taste and was otherwise forgotten by the wider culture.

And then the Duffer Brothers needed a song for a girl named Max.

The selection process started years before anyone saw a frame of Stranger Things Season 4. Matt and Ross Duffer, the show's creators, were writing a storyline for Max Mayfield, the skateboarding, headphone-wearing teenager played by Sadie Sink. Max had lost her stepbrother Billy at the end of Season 3. She was devastated, withdrawn, isolated. She'd broken up with Lucas. She'd retreated behind her Walkman, playing a single song on repeat as a kind of emotional armor. In the scripts, every placement where that song appeared was tagged with a placeholder: "TBD Max song."

The show's music supervisor, Nora Felder, landed on "Running Up That Hill" and brought it to the brothers. The serendipity is almost too perfect. The Duffers had independently arrived at the same song through their own Spotify searches. Felder sent an email saying she thought it should be Kate Bush. They'd already decided the same thing, completely separately. Now, I'll be honest, this kind of origin story always makes me suspicious. It has the neatness of a narrative engineered after the fact, the kind of thing that gets polished in retelling until it sounds like destiny rather than a production meeting. But multiple sources confirm it independently, and Felder has told the story in enough detail across enough interviews that I believe it. Sometimes the right song just announces itself.

The problem was getting permission from Kate Bush. And that wouldn't be easy.

Bush is legendarily protective of her music. She controls everything. And here's where one of the less obvious threads of this story becomes one of the most important. In 1976, before she'd released a single record, before "Wuthering Heights" made her famous, a teenage Kate Bush founded a publishing company called Noble & Brite Ltd. She was 18 years old. Most artists at that stage are just grateful someone wants to sign them. Bush, somehow, had the foresight or the stubbornness or both to start building an ownership structure before there was anything to own. Over the decades that followed, she maintained control of her master recordings, eventually launching her own label, Fish People, in 2011. The result is that Kate Bush is what the music industry calls a unicorn. She owns 100% of her masters and is the sole credited songwriter on nearly everything she's ever released. Prince famously wrote "slave" on his face to protest not owning his work. Taylor Swift re-recorded entire albums to reclaim hers. Bush just... never gave hers away in the first place.

This matters enormously for the financial part of the story, which we'll come to later, but it also means that nothing happens with a Kate Bush song unless Kate Bush personally approves it.

The negotiation took two years. Tim Miles, a senior VP at Warner Music UK, called it probably the longest TV licensing negotiation he'd ever seen. Just picture the whole thing for a second. A music supervisor in Los Angeles falls in love with a 37-year-old song and becomes convinced it's the only possible choice for a scene that hasn't been filmed yet in a show that won't air for years. She writes what amounts to a graduate thesis to explain why. Meanwhile, a 63-year-old woman in a farmhouse in Devon, who hasn't given an interview in six years, who owns an ancient mobile phone, who has no idea what TikTok is, is sitting with her family watching a Netflix show about kids on bikes in 1980s Indiana. She has no idea that the people who made the show she's watching are at that very moment trying to figure out how to convince her to say a word she almost never says. Two years of emails and script pages and raw footage cross the Atlantic. And eventually, from the garden, the answer comes back.

She said yes.

The song enters the story of *Stranger Things* in Episode 4, "Dear Billy," which aired on May 27, 2022. Here is what happens.

Max visits Billy's grave to read him a farewell letter. It's a monologue about guilt and grief and family falling apart, and Sadie Sink absolutely destroys it. Mid-confession, the villain Vecna seizes her mind. He pulls her into a psychic nightmare. A bloodied apparition of Billy taunts her. In the real world, her body goes rigid. Her friends discover that music, specifically music with deep emotional significance to the victim, can break Vecna's hold. Lucas jams headphones onto Max's ears. He presses play.

The opening synth notes filter into Vecna's red-lit hellscape, faint at first, then swelling. A portal of light opens. Max sees her friends calling for her. Happy memories flood back. The Snow Ball dance. Moments with Eleven. And as the show's composer layers an orchestral arrangement over Bush's original recording, Max runs through the crumbling nightmare toward the light.

She makes it. She collapses into her friends' arms at the cemetery. *Thank God.*

I remember watching that scene and feeling something I hadn't expected. When the synth line kicked in, I had that same jolt of recognition I'd later feel in the Starbucks, but mixed with something else. The song had always been a little too intense for me, beautiful but unsettling, a voice and a rhythm that felt like they were pulling you somewhere you weren't sure you wanted to go. Which, it turns out, is exactly what the Duffer Brothers understood about it. That's what it does for Max too. It pulls her back. And over the episodes that followed, as the song kept returning against increasingly impossible stakes, something shifted for me too. I stopped finding it intense and started finding it reliable and beautiful… and perfect. A song I could count on. By the time the show's final season aired on New Year's Eve 2025, months before I'd sit down to write this piece, "Running Up That Hill" had become something it never was for me in 1985, or 1995, or 2015. It had become personal.

The episode holds a perfect score on Rotten Tomatoes and won Emmy Awards for both Outstanding Music Supervision and Prosthetic Makeup. And within four days, it detonated the global music charts.

Here is where the numbers get insane, and I want to give them to you straight because the scale of what happened is the story.

Within four days of the premiere, Spotify streams of "Running Up That Hill" surged 8,700% globally and 9,900% in the US. The song hit No. 1 on Spotify in 18 countries simultaneously. Apple Music streams rose over 5,400%. On Shazam, May 29, 2022, became the biggest single day in Kate Bush's entire career.

On the Billboard Hot 100, the song re-entered at No. 8, giving Bush her first-ever US Top 10 hit. It eventually climbed to No. 3, a chart position set a record as the longest gap between a song's Hot 100 debut and a Top 5 appearance. Thirty-six years, nine months, and two weeks.

To put the streaming numbers in perspective before *Stranger Things*, "Running Up That Hill" had accumulated roughly 465 million total Spotify streams across its entire existence. Every stream from 1985 to May 2022. All of it. Today the song has passed 1.5 billion. Which means more than two-thirds of all the streams this song has ever received over nearly forty years came after a fictional teenager put on her headphones. Over 2.7 million TikTok videos were created using the track. In June 2023, it became the first solo recording by a female artist from the 1980s to cross one billion Spotify streams.

A song that peaked at No. 30 in America in 1985 became, for a few weeks in the summer of 2022, the single most-played song on Earth.

Now let's talk money.

What most people don't realize is that every time a song is streamed, two separate royalties are generated. One goes to whoever owns the master recording, typically the record label. The other goes to whoever owns the publishing, typically the songwriter. It's roughly a 50/50 split. Most artists who record for major labels retain somewhere between 15 and 25 percent of the master side, and their publishing is often carved up among co-writers, producers, and publishing companies. Bush owns both. She owns

100% of the master through her label, and she collects 100% of the publishing because she's the sole credited songwriter. When the streaming surge hit, the money didn't flow to a label or a publishing house or a roster of co-writers. It flowed to her. Just her.

Luminate, the industry analytics firm, estimated Bush earned $2.3 million in streaming royalties in the first four weeks after the premiere alone. By six weeks, an updated estimate put the figure at $3.75 million. That's just streaming. It doesn't include whatever Netflix paid for the sync license, which is the separate fee a production company pays for the right to use a song in a film or television show. The sync fee for "Running Up That Hill" has never been disclosed, but analysts estimate high five to six figures for a multi-episode placement of this prominence. These figures do not include physical sales or radio royalties. Nor do they include the uplift across Bush's entire music catalog. *Hounds of Love*, the 1985 album, surged over 2,000% in demand and reached No. 1 on Billboard's Top Alternative Albums, giving Bush her first-ever US chart-topping album, thirty-seven years after release.

What would this song have earned Bush over its full lifetime before *Stranger Things*? Nobody knows the exact number, but we can sketch the outline. The song was a moderate hit in 1985, then spent decades as a catalog track generating modest royalties from radio play, compilation albums, and the slow trickle of streaming that began in the 2010s. A reasonable industry estimate for a song of that profile, owned by the artist, over 37 years, might be somewhere in the low single-digit millions, total. In the six weeks after "Dear Billy" aired, she may have matched or exceeded that entire lifetime figure. And the song hasn't stopped streaming since. At current rates, with 1.5 billion Spotify streams and counting, the post-*Stranger Things* royalties almost certainly dwarf everything the song earned in its first four decades combined, probably by a factor of five or more.

So how did Kate Bush respond to all of this? She hadn't given a recorded interview in six years.

She's famously, almost comically private. She doesn't tour. She performed 22 shows in London in 2014, her first live concerts in 35 years, and that appears to have satisfied whatever small appetite she had for the stage. She lives in Devon. She gardens. She

raises her son. She does not have a social media presence. She owns what she described in one interview as an "ancient" mobile phone. She had no idea what TikTok was.

When the revival hit, she posted a series of statements on her website. The tone was genuinely bemused. She wrote that she waited "with bated breath" for the rest of Season 4 in July. After the finale, she said she felt "deeply honoured" that the song was chosen and that she was "in awe" of the Duffer Brothers.

Her most revealing comments came during a rare appearance on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* in June 2022, where she told the host: "The whole world's gone mad." She laughed when told about TikTok trends. She admitted she never listens to her old music. She said her son thought the whole thing was "pretty cool."

She sent the Duffer Brothers a very strange, very Kate Bush gift. A gilded bird cage with animatronic birds inside that chirped a song when wound up. "Very cool, very unique and very Kate Bush," Ross Duffer said. "Only Kate Bush would give this present."

She did not attend her own Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction in November 2023. St. Vincent performed "Running Up That Hill" in her honor. She directed an animated short film. She invited 52 visual artists to create work inspired by the song for a War Child charity auction. And then, presumably, she went back to the garden.

That's the life of a song. Written in an evening in a barn in 1983 by a woman the industry had written off. Released in 1985 under a name its creator never wanted. A modest hit, then a deep cut, then nearly four decades of quiet, until a fictional teenager put on her headphones, and a billion people pressed play.

Back in the Starbucks, the song is ending. The playlist is already moving on to whatever comes next. I'm sitting here thinking about the distance between a barn in Kent and this coffee shop, between 1983 and right now, between a woman who fought her label over the word God and the kid two tables over who just Shazamed the track without knowing any of this.

Forty years of a song's life, compressed into a four-minute experience that means something completely different to every person hearing it, and something the same too.