

RAMPD Pt.1 | Discover Stories Episode 61

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Graeme Wyman 0:54

Hello and welcome to the latest edition of Re-Imagine Radio's artists podcast. Today we are joined with Lachi Music and Arthur Gwynne all the way from New York City. So thank you both very much for coming in today, and also joined by program coordinator Bryden Veinot.

Bryden Veinot 1:15

Thanks for having me.

Graeme Wyman 1:16

So thank you both for coming. Hopefully you're enjoying the city?

Lachi 1:21

Yes, yes, yes. Vancouver. Who knew? [Laughs]

Graeme Wyman 1:24

Yeah, I know, right. Hopefully an unkept gem.

Bryden Veinot 1:26

Yeah, you escaped the rain in New York to come to Vancouver, where it's not raining, seems kind of backwards.

Lachi 1:32

It seems a little backwards. We won't say man-made, you know, climate change just yet.

Graeme Wyman 1:38

However... [Laughs] Little asterisk on that. Yeah, so before we dive into getting know a bit more about RAMPD would you both mind letting our listeners know how you got started in music and decided to pursue that as a career?

Lachi 1:55

What a heavy question. My mom says. So, this is Lachi. She/her, Black woman, cornrows. My mom told me that I started playing the piano in the room in the womb so babies would kick, apparently, I would be playing the keys against her. But, you know, identifying as blind when I was super young, I was a bit of an outcast because I was legally blind, so I couldn't not see enough to be in the blind box, but I couldn't see enough to not be in the blind box, and so I didn't really fit anywhere. So I spent a lot of that alone time, taking to the pen, writing, whether it was stories, songs and stuff like that, and I was able to express myself in that way. But it wasn't really, honestly, until the pandemic, or until a bit before the pandemic, when I really started to embrace my disability and including that in my music and in my art, that I really started to, I guess, blow up, I guess is the way to put it, and really starting to touch in on my authentic self. So right now, I'm a recording artist, a touring performer, I am a Grammys board governor, and I'm on the board of several music entities. I'm also a disability inclusion advocate, a cultural activist, an author, a writer, all of the things, if anyone gives me a cheque, I do it. [Laughs] And then, of course, I'm the founder and now Advisory Board Chair of RAMPD and I'm here with my manager slash operations dude, Arthur, who actually has his own really interesting story, so I'll toss it over to you, Art.

Arthur Gwynne 3:32

Yeah, no, thanks. So I'm Arthur. I'm a big and tall white guy with way too much red hair, and I identify as neurodiverse. And like Lati said, I'm her full time manager. I got involved really more after COVID when she was exploring, you know, her disclosure journey, right, of blending her brand more with her disability identity, getting involved with the Grammys and kind of the functioning of how the music industry works, right? I don't have any music background at all. I'm the business guy, right? So, like, I started out doing, like, SWOT analysis and budgeting and like, kind of building up a business. And as I got more and more involved, my day job, I worked for the AESC, which is like a trade association for headhunters, like search consultants. And I was working remotely. It turned out working remotely was like the best accommodation ever for myself. I hadn't known that or communicated it, but during COVID, I just realized I had so much more energy and brain space. So I started kind of doing this side thing with Lachi, and it was really fascinating work. I started traveling with her as her sighted companion when things started opening up again, and the whole time just working remotely for my job, right? But it was the Grammys of last year at Vegas, my company had called the first ever in-person meeting on the same

week, and I hadn't told him I was there. So I was like, "Oh, [fake cough] I'm sick. I can't make it," whatever. And the next day, we go to the Grammys. The next day, my boss calls, and she's like, "Where are you?" And there's this Forbes article of RAMPD at the Grammys going around LinkedIn, and my dumb ass is sitting there smiling on the carpet with them. And so I was given a choice of, you know, keep my job or do this stuff. So I'm doing this stuff, and it's been, it's been really fascinating. I mean, learning the business and economics of the industry, getting to do, like, real work with real people, through RAMPD and through lots of advocacy, directly. And I don't know, it's just, it's been fascinating. I'm never looking back.

Lachi 5:46

So this is how you know Arthur hasn't done very many podcasts. I mean, you know, humans listen to this. [Everyone laughs] You're just like confessing your whole life.

Graeme Wyman 5:54

I mean, it's an interesting story, I'll say that. [Laughs]

Arthur Gwynne 5:57

I learned a lot from the search side. It's all about networking, you know? I mean, like, and so, like, it's really just applying that in the industry or within the disability community. And so, you know, I'm proud of the work I did back there, but, you know, this is a whole different career path, and I don't see myself going back into that box, right? And that was part of it is, again, I introduce myself as a neurodiverse, I get to wear this on my sleeve and interact with people, you know, in from that disability lens. And, yeah, I don't know the cat's out of the bag. So, you know.

Bryden Veinot 5:58

I appreciate the openness.

Graeme Wyman 6:36

Well, and it obviously seems like a good fit.

Lachi 6:38

Yeah, it's been really great. I mean, at the end of the day, it's the compounded passion, right? One of the big, I won't, I don't want to say complaints, I guess one of the big opportunities that has arisen within the disability community, especially from artists and musicians who tour often. One of the biggest things they say is it'd be really nice to have an agent or a manager who cares about accessibility, who's willing to make sure that I have a

ramp, or who's willing to help enforce my rider or who's willing to just care about it. A lot of folks, and I've heard this from bigger time folks, and they'll say, "Oh, you know, I'm with this big agency, and I ask them about helping me out with accommodations, and they go, there's a ton of other people on my roster. Why would I spend so much effort on you?" Right? And maybe they don't say it in that sort of blunt a way, but that's the general gist. And I know we're going to talk about RAMPD in a bit, but I want to kind of go back to what Arthur was talking about, about networking. I mean, one of the things that really helped me come out of my shell, I think, as an artist with a disability, one of the biggest things that we have to sort of traverse is this idea of isolation, right? This idea that, like, who else is doing it? You know, a lot of the times, disability is so dispersed, and it's very difficult to find somebody else with a disability in general, let alone your specific disability, right? And then, and then to find artists or creators in that space. It's very, I gotta say, COVID did open things up because it allowed for more virtual, the acceptance of more virtual meetups and things like that. But before that, I didn't have any role models. I didn't have anyone I could point on the TV and say, like, oh, I want to be exactly that. Or I want to listen, I want to hear their story on the radio and see that it's my story too, and put that on my vision board. There was none of that. If somebody you know, for the lack of a better example, if someone picked on me, or if I tripped on the stage and it was awkward, I didn't have like a group of folks to go back to, to cry on their shoulder, commiserate, ask them what they did. And that whole aspect of isolation makes it so that it's very difficult to be thrown in to the music industry and already know how to network, right? So there's so many folks who are privileged in that way, like the non-disabled population, because they're so used to just socializing, right? And so when they're thrown into the workplace, whether it be the creative space, and of course, the creative space is already difficult, because you're kind of wearing yourself on your sleeve and saying, "Accept me. And to be able to walk around with confidence and say, "Hey, I belong here," is just not something that a lot of disabled artists have. And so this idea of Arthur bringing in this discussion of, "Hey, by the way, Lachi," and this is a conversation we had. It's like, "By the way, Lachi, did you know you have a really extensive network?" And I was like, "Who? Like, these are just people that I know." And we listed out everyone I knew, and we're like, why don't we just table touch, let's call them up. I don't want to call them. They're gonna think, like, who's like, yeah, why she bothering me? And it's like if they gave you their contact info because they want you to contact them.

Bryden Veinot 10:04

Yeah exactly.

Lachi 10:08

It's a two-way street, right? And that's why I mean, it's just this compounded learning and care of specifically embracing disability narratives within the space of music, and what we need to do to make sure that disabled artists can really be seen and heard.

Graeme Wyman 10:28

Right.

Bryden Veinot 10:29

Nice.

Graeme Wyman 10:29

Very poignant.

Bryden Veinot 10:30

Yeah. I guess to go back to RAMPD just to, we've touched on it a couple times now, and I think maybe some listeners might be wondering what it is. So Lachi, maybe explain what RAMPD is, what the organization does and what the mission is.

Lachi 10:48

Sure I can talk about what RAMPD is and what the mission is, and I can toss it to you, Arthur for some nuts and bolts on what the organization does. So RAMPD stands for Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities, and I got to say, our biggest achievement is the awesome acronym! Are you kidding me?

Bryden Veinot 11:04

It's perfect. I couldn't believe it when I was reading it. Like, "There's no way."

Lachi 11:08

It's so much fun. And really what we do is we are a platform that connects the music and entertainment and gaming, etc. industries to a network of recording artists and recording professionals and industry folk with disabilities—neurodivergence, chronic conditions, hard of hearing, et cetera, et cetera, sort of like pan disability. And our mission is to amplify disability culture, advocate for inclusion and accessibility, specifically within the music industry, honestly, the pan music industry, and the way we sort of do that is several fold. So we have a membership right of our network, and we allow that membership to connect with each other, which is already huge because of the isolation problem I spoke about, right? Folks get to meet each other. Folks get to discuss. Folks get to talk. We also offer paid opportunities, so we partner with other music industry firms, music industry labels,

publishers, organizations, et cetera, to showcase to them who we are, that we exist, that there's this amazing network that exists. And we say, "Hire folks for your programming, for your inclusive content," And so we're able to have some paid opportunities come in. As well as visibility, folks in the industry, honestly just haven't seen us, hasn't seen a lot of this stuff, because they just there hasn't been an organization like ours, especially sort of like at our level, dealing with some of these folks, the Grammys of the world, the Netflix music of the world. And honestly, some of them are finding us just by Googling us. Because it turns out that the music industry actually does want to do this stuff as they work through their diversity and inclusion efforts. The minute somebody says, "Where's your accessibility efforts?" They go, Uh, hold on," and start Googling. And then here we are to plug in that hole. But I'll say just, just a last thing for a bit of historical context. One of the reasons that I founded this organization was because when I joined the Grammys, I believe it was 2019, and by 2020 when the pandemic hit and I started to explore my disability inclusion. I went into the Grammys and I was in some in a leadership role of some sort. What was I, advocacy?

Arthur Gwynne 13:42

Advocacy, yeah.

Lachi 13:43

As in the advocacy committee, where we talked to Congress to try to pass bills and stuff for musicians. And everyone was going around and saying their name in the committee and what they were about. And they got to me, and I said, "My name is Lachi. She/her, Black woman, cornrows. I identify as blind." And they were all like, "Oh, wow. So inspiring." And I said that I would love to know more about the disability and accessibility they're doing at the Grammys. And they were just like, "Oh, well, you know, not much." I mean, you know, people are ready to just confess it, because they know, like, "Okay, so can you help us?" Yeah, you can't fake it, right? But, you know, they were like, well, "There's not others, you know, maybe Stevie Wonder, but there aren't others that we know." And I was like, "That can't be, right? There's got to be tons and tons throughout the U.S. I'm not the only one." I kept going in rooms and them saying, like, "Well, you're the first." And I'm like, There's absolutely no way. We've been around for 2000 years, since Christ, right? And then, like, 13 billion years before that. There's no way I'm the first."

Bryden Veinot 14:13

Like now we're finally having an artist.

Lachi 14:45

Yeah, exactly. There's no way. And so that was the beginning of the journey. I mean, the Recording Academy did get behind me. The Grammys did get behind me on this journey of like, let me find other artists. Let's do a panel. We did a panel. They made it national, and they allowed for the music industry to see us. And once that panel hit, we did a panel with a few disabled artists that I knew, and the actual Recording Academy themselves. Valeisha Butterfield, was the president at that time, and she was like, "This is such a great conversation. The Recording Academy is going to take notes and we're going to come back to you guys with some, you know, impact efforts." And I remember thinking like, "You guys, who, like, just the five of us?" And that was when ramp started. People started going in my inbox after watching that event and going like, "Lachi, are you going to lead this effort, then? Are we going to put together a voice that they can come back to?" And I remember thinking like my manager had just, my previous manager had just passed away. I had just started breaking into, breaking out as an artist, and I had so much to do. And I remember thinking like, everything is in shambles. There's no way I can take this on. But in reading those messages in my inbox of like that, pumped up energy. Of like, let's do this. Are you going to be the one to lead this thing? How could I not say yes? So I'll pass it over to you. Arthur.

Arthur Gwynne 16:08

Yeah. I mean, I don't know what else to really add to that. But I mean, from, like, I guess more from like, a business perspective, right? Like, RAMPD is actually really set up in an interesting way. So it has an executive committee which, by definition, you have to be a professional member, which means you're vetted as identifying as disabled and in the music industry. And so that's where, like our President is, VP, Lachi's on it now as Advisory Board Chair, and it allows us to be able to grow pretty aggressively and decide within the community what projects we want to invest in or work on together, while making sure that the reins are always going to be held by the people that RAMPD is supposed to represent, right? Like we are going to make sure, no matter where this ends up, in 10, 20, 50, years, that the leadership is always going to be from the community that it's meant to serve. I also got to say, from like a product perspective, like, ultimately, it's really the website rampd.org, you can search through our pro members right there, and that was the need that this is originally filling. Of saying, Who else is there? It's like, well, we got 59 pro members right now, so there's at least 59 of them, right? And as we continue to expand, my favorite part of my job is, again, like the stack networking site, like I'm connecting with business organizations and communities. We're connecting with disability orgs and identifying members from both of those audiences that we can bring into the RAMPD community, and as well as those that we can work with to expand the opportunities of our community. And it's almost like a, "if you build it, they will come" kind of situation, and it's

it's just been really neat just being the glue to bind this very needed thing together. And, I don't know, it's practically building itself at this point, and it's just really satisfying.

Lachi 18:14

We also have, like, we have two levels of membership, right? So we've got the professional membership, which are folks who are vetted as professionals within the music industry, and that's where that number of 59 to 60 comes from. But we also have a community membership where you don't have to be a music professional, you just have to want to be a part of the RAMPD fund, and you get pretty much the same perks. You just can't lead a committee and be a part of the executive committee. But that is in the hundreds. I believe we have like, 800 or something, community members, yeah, so, so that's been a that's been really fun to be able to watch people connect in general, but also to be able to watch the community get to point at professionals and follow them and, you know, support them and things of that nature. So it's been really great. And then another thing about the fact that we're led by disabled leaders and neurodivergent leaders within our committees and our executive committee, we're very disability culture and Disability Justice oriented. So when people hear the words Disability Justice, they think laws and rights. But actually Disability Justice is a framework discussing disability in terms of intersectionality, looking at folks as whole beings, right? So the fact that there are dozens of pan disabled, you know, it's there are different disabilities, and that disability intersects with with race, it intersects with gender, it intersects with sexual preference, it intersects with class, it intersects with size. And that we want to make sure that when we advocate for disability, we're advocating for disability through that lens and that we're leaning into those who are multi marginalized and doubly intersected, when we're tossing them into leadership roles and when we're making sure that we are getting gigs and and opportunities for folks, and when we're presenting ourselves. So when we're presenting our membership, we want to make sure that the gamut of race, gender, preference and disability is served. And then when we talk about disability culture, disability culture is, you know, the words, the songs, the art, the perspectives, the contributions that we give to the world as people with disabilities, and it's also our shared lived experiences. It's the fact that our decisions are rooted in problem solving, our decisions are rooted in innovative creativity, our decisions and our lives and our words and our perspectives are rooted in resilience. And all of these things should be celebrated. They it comes from the fact that we navigate a world that wasn't built for us. It comes from a fact that we are we deal with erasure, we deal with oppression, and we deal with the fact that we all know everyone's going to have to deal with this at some point. So we're just, we're we're time travelers, right? We're here in the future. We're already here, guys, and we're telling you what you're gonna see. And I believe that disability culture is such a deep rooted part of the human experience, and it really deserves to be celebrated.

Bryden Veinot 21:14

Yeah, I was just gonna quickly say, like, one thing I appreciate so much is the shift from being reactive about accessibility to being proactive about it, and that's a huge part of what RAMPD is doing, I think.

Lachi 21:27

Exactly.

Graeme Wyman 21:28

And then your whole idea around problem solving, like, resonates with, I think what we do, oh, yeah, like, it's, again, no one client that we cater to has, you know, the same.

Bryden Veinot 21:37

Everyone's different. But we treat everyone the same though. And, yeah, it's cool.

Graeme Wyman 21:42

And specifically trying to help them or support them on however far their music journey goes, which is obviously what you guys are doing as well.

Arthur Gwynne 21:50

Yeah, and, you know, it's that's the other side of this position we're trying to put ourselves in, right? Because, like, it's professional musicians, right? Because there's plenty of things when you talk about music and disability, you know, the first thing that a lot of people think of is like, after school programs right for disabled children and stuff like that. And it's like, that's fine. It's got its place. You know, music therapy is its own thing. It's like, helping people find their hobbies and stuff. That's great. But when it comes to, you know, an adult trying to pursue a career, whether it's as a musician or it's in the industry itself, right? A&R reps or label folk or, you know, literally just being in a corporate environment at like Sony or whatever, there's not a lot of conversation at all. And even when you talk about, like, corporate DEI kind of stuff, you know, disability is still pretty far back in the rear view mirror of of the music industry, specifically. So other industries that have had some growth or are starting to figure this thing out, still kind of like a decade behind on on the entertainment side, and even when they talk about employment, you know, you'll get into things like, "Okay, but what about leadership?" What about, you know, having disability representation in your like A&R reps, like the people that are your sync agents, the people that are making the decisions, are still not really representative, and we have to make that sexy and attractive, so that we can skip, like, you know, the very slow crawl of corporate DEI-ism,

right? And really just kind of be like, No, you want to do this, and you want to celebrate it and be happy and excited to do it.

Lachi 23:32

There's also the discussion too, of there probably are, right? There probably are A&Rs, or, you know, from from the lower level to the higher level, who do have disabilities in these corporate structures, but they're afraid to come off as, you know, non-competitive. And we want to make it so that, like step one, if you are a person in a corporate situation and you do identify in this way, join us. You don't have to come out yet to your employers or whatever, but at the very least, come benefit from our resources, connect with other folks and start pumping yourself up, because the first thing I had to do was communicate with others and start building community and start feeling comfortable with myself. Then after that, perhaps you can start feeling more comfortable asking for the accommodations you need, perhaps even publicly identifying, but it's always optional, but the goal is for us to get folks to stop being too ashamed to even admit it to themselves. Yeah, so.

Graeme Wyman 24:34

No, and what you're saying, Lachi, too, like, just personally, like, I mean, I was born with a disability, rare type of dwarfism, but it wasn't really until my work with VAMS that I really embraced it in a different way. Because when I grew up, it was, you know, I was maybe one of two people in the school that had a disability that at least we knew about at the time. And, you know, you kind of shy away from that. And, yeah, no, the work we do here and, and I also wanted to touch on what you were saying around the professional side, like the employees of VAMS, like, whether our degrees or diplomas. We all did engineering and production. We weren't trained in music therapy. We we kind of bring that professional side to it, but to help, I believe, like our artists, whether it's you know, Jeff or Rachel or any of these people, we want to give them that you know, and music therapy is its own separate thing, and and there's a huge need for that. But what we try to do here is kind of, I guess, support what RAMPD is trying to promote. That's the way I would put it.

Lachi 25:48

First of all, why aren't you a RAMPD member? So that's happening.

Bryden Veinot 25:57

Called out on our own podcast.

Graeme Wyman 26:00

Rob Calder, who put us in touch, and I'm glad he did. I didn't, had not heard about the organization.

Arthur Gwynne 26:07

That is one of the cool things. I mean, we're literally here just because we're in Vancouver, and we're like, what's the local disability music intersection scene? It's like, here you are. Great, you know. And so we get again, I mean, like, lots of travel, so much. And while we're out here, we get to meet folks and expand this out, you know. And RAMPD is, by the way, meant to be international, like we're fairly focused in the U.S. We've got our biggest, you know, external stronghold is the UK, where we have six members in the UK, we have one member in Canada right now, in Toronto. But, yeah, exactly. But like, so when we get out, it's like it comes out the woodwork. It's like, "Have you met this person? Have you heard of that person?" Like, "Oh, I saw this person?" Or the other way around, like, we were at Music Business Association a couple months ago, and we just had a little booth, and we're talking to people, had three different professionals come up, and through the course of the conversation, it's like, "Well, actually, I'm partially deaf in one ear." It's like, well, guess the I don't know if I can curse on this thing, but it's like, guess what? I don't know. And it's you know, disclosure and identity and all those journeys, right? But like community, it all starts with community and to see, having a pattern, having a place to fit and contextualizing it outside of just like, you know, whatever your experience has been up to that, like on the individual side of it, right? So, yeah.

Graeme Wyman 27:37

And each person has, I think, their own journey for acceptance, but I think embracing that's, I think one of the key words is, you know, I hope, like I believe, we are making that shift.

Lachi 27:49

Yeah, it's difficult to quantify, right? Because it's all different internal journeys. And, of course, the music industry is always, it will always be the most difficult, because A, it's not really visual, right? It's not like in Hollywood or whatever, where you can start seeing more folks with wheelchairs on screen or whatever. However, I firmly believe that music is one of the biggest conduits of culture.

Graeme Wyman 28:13

Totally. Oh, yeah.

Lachi 28:14

So, you know, speaking of, you know, learning about different cultures, the easiest way to do that is through music. And I think that one of the best ways we can storytell about disability culture will be through the music industry. But I wanted to touch on a point you made about how you didn't accept your disability earlier on. It's so funny because I actually had better vision younger and they told me that I was going to have to use a cane, and I was like, "Oh God, I can't use a cane, because if I use a cane, everyone's already making fun of me. I really don't want to have more attention to what I'm doing." And so I didn't use a cane. And as my vision got worse, I needed the cane more, and was even more disdainful of the cane. And then eventually, when I began to accept who I was, and I just started to find more success in music and I decided, "You know what, I can't keep walking up to a friend in the street, giving them a hug and realizing that they're a tree. Like I need to get my act together." And so I started using my canes. And then I started to realize, as I was going to these events, that, like, well, the cane doesn't look good with all of my different red carpet dresses. So I started to bedazzle my canes, and I would start to put, like, rhinestones and glitter. And at first it was a little corny, right? Like, aw so cute. And then we just started making them really elegant and sleek. And now just part of my brand is the glam cane, and I don't actually need it all the time. So if it's a really bright, sunny day and I'm just going, like, from my apartment to the corner store, I don't really need it. But guess what? I use it anyway because it's cute and it matches my heels, and I might actually need it. It turns out I always need it when I don't have it. [Laughs] But I say that because it's so full circle, because it is like a testament to the confidence that my interdependence brings me, right? Like I can confidently walk down New York City, which is like the most tough city in the world, with my big heels, my cane, and people jump out the way, and they're like, "I wish," or like, "If I ever go blind, I definitely want to be her." So there's power in independence and in that self acceptance. And that's just another thing that myself, personally, and we at RAMPD really hope to, I don't know, amplify.

Bryden Veinot 30:39

Well, Graeme and I were watching your performance at Disability:IN.

Lachi 30:43

Oh, gosh. [Laughs]

Bryden Veinot 30:45

When you started, you did your visual description. Said what your dress was, cornrows, everything. And then there was like little bits of claps, and then you described the cane, and everyone's like, "Yeah!"

Lachi 30:58

Oh, she always gets bigger applause.

Arthur Gwynne 31:01

Actually, soo at that conference, at the disability and conference this year, we had done like a little side event of, like, glam your cane. And so it's like, bring your accessibility device, and we'll kind of like, you know, rhinestone it up. And, you know, we thought maybe one or two people would show up.

Lachi 31:18

Yeah we had like two sign ups. And we were like, "Oh, I guess we're just gonna show up."

Arthur Gwynne 31:23

We got there, we like, rolled in, like, five minutes late to our own event, kind of thing. And there were like, 20 people there.

Lachi 31:29

There was more than that. There was, like, a lot of people.

Arthur Gwynne 31:32

And it was like everything from like dog harnesses to like walkers and like, just whatever the hell people had.

Lachi 31:38

People wanted to bling out their wheelchair.

Arthur Gwynne 31:41

And then the rest of the conference is, like, there's glam. It was glam everywhere for like, the second half of the conference. It was like, "Where did you get that done?" "Oh, it was a Lachi thing." So, like, it was, it's culture, right? And I don't know it was a really wild experience, yeah.

Graeme Wyman 31:57

And it's gaining empowerment too, right?

Arthur Gwynne 32:06

Mhm.

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