



The Activist Files Episode 18: Radical Joy - The Rude Mechanical Orchestra

- Jen: Hi everyone. Welcome to The Activist Files. Today we're going to talk with members of the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, a radical marching band, also known as the RMO. And we have with us today Bronte Walker and Sarah Blessed. And I am Jen Nessel and I work at the Center for Constitutional Rights. And I'm looking forward to talking with folks. Welcome.
- Sarah: Thanks for having us, Jen.
- Bronte: Yeah, thanks so much.
- Jen: You all work to support movements. And I wanted to know a little bit about your mission and then how you got your start.
- Bronte: We are a radical marching band that aims to support workers, women the LGBTQIA+ community, immigrants and people of color and really just aim to bring energy to any marches, protests, demonstrations that they have to support their communities. So yeah, we aim to support those groups through coming to any protests or demonstrations that are having any rallies and really just up the energy with our music. And support them that way.
- Jen: And how did RMO get started?
- Sarah: Oh, that's a nice long story. I mean there's a lot of ways that the band came together. I can speak from my perspective, which is, cause I had been in it since the

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beginning. I'm probably one of the, the, I think I'm the only original member at this point. And you know, really came about I think in 2004. So we're 15 years old now. We're in our teenage years.

Jen: So very rebellious.

Sarah: Yes, we're very rebellious. We're very rude. And in 2004 you know, there were two things going on at that point that I think are these formative events for the band. I think one of them was the march for women's lives that happened in Washington, D C National March. And then the other was the, the Republican National Convention that had the gall to come to New York City in 2004. And I think through those events there was just a huge, well, particularly the RNC in New York.

Sarah: It was such a time when so many people were angry and creative - and used their anger creatively, which was really fantastic. And I hope that we get to that place again because that really was going on at that time. And I had been really inspired by Bread and Puppet in Vermont, which is this radical puppet theater that's been around for 50 years. I'd been inspired by the WTO World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. And I had seen the fact that you could use, you know, music and puppets and spectacle to really amplify the message. Right. And I'd also grown up in DC where I'd gone to lots of boring protests. You know, I, I would cut school and go to the national marches in DC and I, you know, they were, they were amazing in many ways, but I knew that the march for women's lives would be one of these big mobilizations that maybe wouldn't have the, the energy and excitement of something like the WTO protests in Seattle.

Sarah: Right. So I was really excited about trying to bring music. I'd been a drummer for many years at that point. And I actually, oh, it sounds weird when I say this, but I did actually have a dream. I had a dream, I woke and - Bronte's looking at me like, what?

Bronte: I've never heard this story.

Sarah: No. I had, I actually had a dream that I, I, I put together a band and it went to the march for women's lives. And so I went to NARAL, National Abortion Rights Action League organizing, you know, because they were the bottom liners for the march for women's lives. And in 2004 and I went to

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one of these organizing meetings and I was like, I want to start a band and bring it to the march. And everyone was like, who are you and what are you talking about?

Sarah: But one of those organizers took me seriously and connected me to Michelle Hardesty. And that's how I met Michelle. And so Michelle and I met at the Tea Lounge in Park Slope, Brooklyn, which no longer exists. And we like, it was like a blind date. And we met and we're like, we want to do this thing together. We want to start a radical marching band. And Michelle was coming at it from the angle of I want to bring a band to the RNC protests. And I was coming at it from, I want to bring a band to the march for women's lives. And so, so we agreed that this would be the same thing and we would work together. And Michelle at that time was part of the Hungry March Band, which has a huge, long, fantastic history in New York City. But the, you know, they had decided at a certain point that they didn't want to enter the political space.

Sarah: They didn't want to be part of the protests. So Michelle was really trying to, you know, bring that to the RNC. And so that's how we kind of got started. And a lot of us in the beginning, we're part of the Hungry March Band, you know you know, for a while that was the majority of our members. And then at a certain point, you know, it evolved and it's evolved many times since then. So, but Michelle is still continues to play with us and is, I still think of her as an active member of the project.

Jen: How many people do you think over the years have passed through the Rude Mechanical Orchestra?

Sarah: It's a scary question. Hundreds.

Jen: Hundreds of people have been in the band.

Sarah: Yeah, I think so.

Bronte: I mean, we generally have like twenty, twenty-five active members.

Jen: At any given time. Yeah. One of which I should say just, you know, to be honest here, I'm straightforward. Full disclosure, that's the phrase I was looking for. Full disclosure, my partner Matt has been in the band for 13 years, I want to say. And our kid, Oscar is also occasionally

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in the band. He's 13. And Matt Plays Tuba and Oscar plays snare drum. And what do you two play?

Sarah: I play Bass Drum. This is Sarah.

Bronte: I play trumpet.

Jen: And Bass Drum is the big boom, boom, boom one, right?

Sarah: Yes, that's right. I think of it as the heartbeat. You know,

Jen: You are the heartbeat.

Sarah: Aw. Thank you. I'm gonna cry.

Jen: So I actually asked Matt for like a partial list of some of the people that you have played in support of, and just since January, this is a partial list: Defend Democracy in Brazil; [inaudible]; Make the Road, New York; Cosecha, New York; Poor People's Campaign; The Revolting Lesbians; Sunshine Movement; Extinction rebellion; Planned Parenthood of New York; United Food and Commercial Workers Local 342; Laundry Workers Center; Rusa LGBT, the Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance; New York City for Abortion Rights; No More Deaths; No Mas Muertas; No New Jails, NYC; Lower East Side United Neighborhood Gardens; Adola; Jews for Racial and Economic Justice; Garment Workers Union; New Sanctuary Coalition; Bay Ridge for Social Justice and the Arab American Association of New York; and the Lower East Side Girls' Club.

Sarah: It's so interesting to hear you read that list because I think that we constantly grapple with the fact that we can't do more. You know, we we're all volunteers. Everyone's busy. This is New York. Everyone has different, you know, competing priorities. And so there's so many times when we have said, we can't do this. It's great to hear that list.

Jen: That's just in less than a year. So what are some of your favorite gigs or craziest gigs that you can remember doing?

Sarah: Want to take this one?

Bronte: Yeah, I mean I have one particular one that we actually do every year.

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- Bronte: So every year we go to the Honk Festival in Summerville, Massachusetts. And we we've been doing, so at the end of the weekend, on the Sunday night, we play at the South Bay detention center and we play kind of on this overhead footpath that's like next to the highway and we can actually see the windows of where a lot of people are in detention basically. And a lot of them are immigrants and they've been in there for like seven years sometimes. And it's, it's heartbreaking, but at the same time it's like a, it's amazing. We get maybe a hundred musicians from all of Honk from like all over the world, and the u s to come with us and play for them for like an hour. It's my, and it's, yeah. That's great.
- Jen: That's, that's really moving.
- Sarah: Yeah. I mean, I think that there's this great, so one of our former members was this out women Jane who said this great thing once.
- Sarah: It's like, oh my God, you're so funny. And she said, we just, we walk around the streets a lot and yell at buildings and it's so true. Like we do a lot of yelling at, you know, buildings, you know, and, and so I think what Bronte's bringing up, and it's, I think it's just so true. It's like there, there are these moments where we actually can see the people that were trying to either either help or fight against. And it's really rare when we have those moments. And so I guess, you know, I'll bring up one of the other times where we got a chance to actually you know, yell at somebody actively. And that was, it was many years ago, but it was, I think it was the director of the housing agency in New York City that was doing some really bad policies around you know, homeless folks. And so we actually went to his house in Brooklyn heights and you know, it was probably like five or six in the morning.
- Sarah: And we, we, along with this is with, um this is this, this with a Picture the Homeless and we, you know, made a lot of noise and he, and I'd be, I guess, you know, hats off to him. He actually came out of his house and went to work. And so we actually went with him all the way to his office and we took you, I don't know if you'd been on the it's like the two, three, there's an elevator. Right. And we were like in the elevator, you know, and people, you know, talking to him folks from Picture the Homeless were talking to him. We were all, you know, making lots of noise and we accompanied him all the way to his office. And that actually was quite tremendous. And you know, more of that, you

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know, but I do think that, you know, anything we can do around like lately it's been anything around closing the camps and immigrant rights that we've really, you know, have really been supporting.

Jen: That's great. One of the reasons I thought it would be great to have you on the podcast is, and Bronte and I were talking about this is if there's a kind of parallel to what the Rude Mechanical Orchestra does and what the Center for Constitutional Rights does and, and both groups seeking to help and support and elevate movements. Our clients and the cases we bring and the movements that we support and you all in the, all of the groups that you support and, and bring joy to, we bring legal cases to and you bring joy.

Sarah: Takes all it takes all of us, right?

Jen: It really does. Yeah. But if anyone's ever been on a march, a boring march versus a march where you get lucky enough to march alongside the RMO, it's so much fun and there's so much energy and everybody in that section of the march is just having the best time. I'm wondering like what some of your favorite songs are that you do what you get the best response from, cause you have a pretty big repertoire by now.

Sarah: We do and we've had, we've, yes. Many discussions about how to make that repertoire more manageable. But yeah. What's your favorite right now?

Bronte: I always have a soft spot for Cariñito, which is one of our Spanish songs. Yeah. yeah, it's just like very like fun and has dynamics, which is good. yeah. I don't know. What's yours?

Sarah: Yeah. I would say cause I guess Matador is always like, I always felt good about matador. It's very, it's very angry and fun. So if, you know, if I'm in that moment where I just feel like their energy is strong, energies required, Matador is really great and so many people know it and sing along with us. And I think that's always been something that we really try and strive for, which is what is, what are people gonna know and what can, what will get people just excited when they hear it. And so lately we've actually, our latest one.

Sarah: The one we're learning right this second is Old Town Road. Yeah. That's where we've try and do a pop song every, every year. A new pop song. Yeah. So we've done like Bad

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Romance by, you know, by Lady Gaga and we've done you know, Crazy in Love by Beyonce and now we've done Uptown Funk. And so now we're trying to do Old Town Road. And so there's this kind of genre of pop songs we try and bring in along with the, you know, we also have been picked up, we picked up all you, All You Fascist Bound to Lose and Which Side Are You On? And different kinds of songs that have this political history. Totally. Yeah.

Jen: I miss Push It.

Sarah: Oh yeah. I've missed Push It too, I think we should bring it back.

Jen: time for bringing back the rotation.

Sarah: Okay. All right. If Jen wants it back, we're going to bring it back. Yes. Yeah.

Jen: Have you had run ins with the NYPD?

Sarah: Oh yeah.

Jen: In your time, all these protests?

Sarah: Yes. Yes, we have. You know, it's funny, I think that in a certain way the band has been a little bit of a protective force against too much crap from the NYPD because once you're a big loud thing, they don't really want to get, they don't really, you know, they've certainly haven't been nice to us, but they also haven't messed with us that much. We have, there have been arrests of band members, myself for example. But that actually happened when I was nowhere near the band. I just had, I just happened to be in the area with my instrument. But if, you know, so I do think that in a way the band is constantly running into the NYPD.

Sarah: But because we're this kind of loud, obnoxious entity, they don't want to, they don't get, they don't mess with this too much. Yeah. What would you say Bronte?

Bronte: Yeah. I mean I've been lucky. I don't think since I've been in the band, which was about four and a half years that around anyone's been arrested since then. But yeah, and we also like check in with each other and see if, you know, if it is kind of a, what we call like a high risk situation, then we'll check in with everyone in the band and you know, see

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like what their, you know, whether they can get arrested, don't want to get arrested, you know, what is their situation. So we make sure everyone's safe obviously. Cause there are some situations that can get a little hairy. So, and we have, you know, sometimes if we know it, it could be high risk, then we have someone offsite who has all our numbers, all our like emergency contacts and everything. Just make sure if anything happens that we're covered.

Jen: Your Pros.

Bronte: Done this before.

Jen: Have, I guess one thing I've been wondering, we're all at such a, a loss at the moment with everything going on in the world and in this country and it's so massive and terrifying. I'm wondering if you over the years have seen a change in movement spaces and, and how things are, like how has it evolved under different administrations? I mean our most now existed under Bush and under Obama and under Trump

Sarah: And under, you know, Bloomberg and under de Blasio because I think that has, I mean we've certainly have seen a, a difference between Bloomberg and de Blasio in terms of how the NYPD responds. We just, we have, we, it's, it feels different. But one thing I think it was a lot more tense. Well this is what else around on the Occupy time, right? So, you know, we were that and that's when our arrests occurred around Occupy Wall Street. And it was just a really, really tough fraught time. However, I think that that actually is one thing that is completely missing right now. And I would love to have something like that back, which is that Occupy had a physical space that they occupied and all these different kinds of people could come to that space and see each other and talk to each other and it would happen at any time of the day for weeks.

Sarah: You know? And I think that things are so fragmented now and there's, we're, we're being attacked on hundreds of different levels, you know. And so I think that convening of a space where everyone can come together is missing. And I would, you know, how can we create that right now? That's, that's something, I think that was very powerful during that time. And I actually, yeah, I mean, I, I kind of understood why the right to public assembly was so important for the first time. Like in a real way. Like I really

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felt that like public assembly is hugely important and public space is hugely important and that that is not happening right now. And I feel like people are very overwhelmed and I and I think that we're not getting, you know, we call them gig requests. I mean these are, you know, calls for, for us to participate in actions. It is not them that we haven't been inundated, you know, you'd think that right now we would be completely inundated. And I think that it's actually been somewhat quiet in a certain way. And I don't know why, but my theory is that we are just frankly all overwhelmed, you know? And that's something different, you know? And there's too many things that everyone's having to fight all at once,

Jen: Which is why I think when you do show up, when RMO shows up, you bring a much needed sense of fresh energy and, and, and joyous activity. Like it's hard right now, right? Everybody is so angry and under attack.

Sarah: Yeah.

Bronte: Yeah. I mean, I see what we do and like the joy we bring as resistance in its own capacity, you know, and to the people around us. And also, I think when we're doing a march, we bring in all the people off the street who would just walking by and they come and see, oh, like what's going on? And so I think we also bring more people in. But yeah, I think being joyous right now in itself is an act of resistance against everything that's happening. And it's needed.

Jen: How can folks, if they are doing an action request that you come and play with them.

Bronte: Yeah. So we have a website, you can reach us at <http://www.rudemechanicalorchestra.org> and there is a contact tab up the top. And if you can just fill that out that would be great. And it'll come through to us and we'll be in touch.

Sarah: That's right. So once those come through then we talk about it as a whole project and we can sense on whether or not we, we, you know, think that this is in line with our mission. And then we get in touch with the organizers and, you know, figure out the logistics. Usually we'd like to have at least a week or two heads up because we, since we are a consensus based project, it's helpful cause we, we can't just show up, you know. There is a process that we have.

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Sarah: Good to know and you need to be able to get enough members together who are free.

Sarah: That's right.

Jen: Who are your musical heroes? Bronte.

Bronte: Oh boy.

Sarah: We have a band musical hero. I mean we have a few like Janell Monae.

Bronte: Oh yeah.

Jen: And you do Pink.

Sarah: We do Pink and Queen.

Jen: And Queen.

Bronte: Pink has know, become just this like beautiful song. People sing it in the streets with us. It's, it's such like a beautiful moment that we have. Yeah. I'm glad we play that song.

Sarah: Yeah. We were playing that at a really tough, really tough action. The, I forget the name of the group, but it's a, you know, anti-abortion group.

Jen: Focus on the Family.

Sarah: Can I swear. Can I swear here?

Sarah: But it was very, I mean it was very well funded, very well attended. We were not, we, they were the majority. We weren't, we were the minority in terms of protesters and you know and you know, we were just kind of this, this little buzzing bee, you know, trying to, trying to be some kind of energy against these insane people. And at one point we played Pink and it was just really kind of amazing cause I think Pink is a very sex positive song. And it was just a really important thing to, to have. But musical heroes. I mean I would say Nina Simone is another one that was one of mine. We've never even tried to play any Nina Simone, but you know, Mississippi God Damn would be incredible.

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Jen: I know all of you are in the band part-time as volunteers. What do you two do the rest of the time?

Sarah: Oh, well, oh, that's a whole other story. Well, no, it's, I'm sorry, I just, I was, I've been very impacted by the title 10 gag rule lately and so it's what I do professionally has also has been exploding with what I do politically. So it's so it's a very interesting time for me. So I am the director of two health centers that are based in Brooklyn that are in Brooklyn one is in Fort Green and one's in Brownsville. These, these are under public health solutions. These are sexual and reproductive health centers. They have been funded by title 10 for many, many, many years. We made a decision to walk away from the funding because of the unethical title 10 gag rule which financially sent my organization into a tailspin sent my, my health centers into a tailspin such that we actually had to submit a closure plan to New York State a few weeks ago and lay off 28 people of which I was one.

Sarah: And thankfully we are now though in conversations with the governor's office to find replacement funding. And so we are hopeful that that is gonna happen. And so we pulled back from closing our centers and pulled back from laying off our people. So, so I am, you know, that's, that's my profession. That's what I do. And you know, lately I've been very, very personally impacted by what's happening on the federal level. And it's just so classist too. I mean it's just so it's patriarchal. It's classist. I mean it's just saying to poor women and primarily poor women of color. You can have only this kind of information, but other people can have this information or these kinds of services or healthcare.

Sarah: So yeah, sorry. That was my answer to what I do outside of the band.

Jen: Well and what I suspect will be a completely different chat.

Bronte: I think I could be more on the opposite spectrum. Yeah. I am a electrical apprentice with Local 3 IBEW International Brotherhood of Electrical Work, electrical workers. I'll say that again. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. And yeah, I've been in the apprenticeship for six months. It's been an interesting experience as like a female presenting person, although that's not how I identify. It's definitely been interesting. I'm the only woman in quotation marks on my job site. But yeah, it's, it's good so far.

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- Sarah: Could it, is it OK if I say one more thing?
- Jen: Of course.
- Sarah: So I guess this is kind of like maybe going back to like the whole 2004 conversation. I think it's really, I think it's kind of amazing that, you know, so the Rude Mechanical Orchestra started in 2004, but so did a, not a lot of other radical marching bands.
- Sarah: So for example, we have our sister who we think of as a sister band in Oakland, California, which is the brass liberation orchestra.
- Jen: Or BLO
- Sarah: Or BLO, right? And so they started then we didn't know them, but they were starting up. And then Cacklelack Thunder, which is a fantastic radical kind of Samba drum corps in Greensboro, North Carolina. They started around then. They actually unfortunately have just, they've, they emailed us and let us know that that Cacklelack is hanging up their sticks this year, which is, which is sad and we will miss them from, you know, this space. But it's just, you know, I do think that there's something about that time that was really, really incredible and really kind of cause all these people and projects to think about music and spectacle in a certain way. And now you know, and the honk, honk festival, which Bronte was talking about is 14 years old.
- Sarah: Right? So it started around then too. Second Line Pleasure Society. I think they're around that timeline, you know, in terms of when they started. So, you know, it's just something to note that I think that's, there's so much energy and wonderful things that can happen out of a really fraught political time. And I'm hoping this is like my hopeful moment here is that because things are so F-d up right now that I'm hoping that we can turn that into something. It's not being overwhelmed and turn it into something that is another moment where other new projects and things can happen. Because we need them, we need them. We were, we're, we can't handle all these actions by ourselves. We want, we want more people out there.
- Bronte: Absolutely. And in other cities as well. And all cities.

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Sarah: Yeah. All cities should have its own radical marching band. If you don't have one, make it happen.

Bronte: Yeah, exactly.

Jen: Do you guys provide trainings?

Sarah: We, you know, it's funny, we, we have done so the honk the honk committee, you know, this, this again like back to the honk festival in Boston. They create this space where bands can talk to each other cause the, the the point of the festival, I mean it's, it is about all these beautiful music projects coming together, but the unifying theme is that they all, you know, are community social justice oriented bands. And so besides all of the shows, we do talk to each other about what, how we operate and what we do. And so we have talked to people about this is how we decide our gigs. This is how we have consensus in our project. And so we've tried to do that for other bands. But yeah, if anyone was interested, we would certainly respond to email or you know, we certainly want to be resources for others who are interested in doing this.

Jen: So start a band, get out in the street.

Sarah: That's right.

Jen: Support social movements.

Sarah: That's right.

Jen: And if you see a marching band wearing green and black, those are the the RMO colors, and a lot of glitter. And I will just say for our listeners that Sarah came wearing her RMO colors, she is wearing green and black stripes for a podcast.

Sarah: It helped me, it helped me emotionally.

Jen: Okay,

Bronte: Good answer.

Jen: I love it. Then you'll know that that is the one and the only fabulous, Rude Mechanical Orchestra.

Sarah: Thank you, Jen.

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Bronte:

Thanks Jen.