**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Episode1: RAMPD Up

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Precious Perez

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

“For me, it's a matter of doing the things that I love and showing future generations and other people in my position that whatever you want to do it is possible to achieve it.”

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to a brand new season of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. If you're a first time listener, thank you for joining us. And welcome to the down to the struts community. If you're a returning listener, we are so grateful for your continued support. Today we'll be kicking off our fifth season by listening in on my conversation with Precious Perez. Precious is a musician and educator and the membership Chair of RAMPD, Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities. Precious than I talked about her journey to becoming a music professional, the creation of RAMPD and her vision for disabled artists in the music industry. Precious is one of two young activists will hear from this season, and she is a clear example of the truth that wisdom defies age. It's never too early or too late to become an agent in the change you want to see. Okay, let's get down to it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Why don't we start off, Precious, with you telling us a little bit about yourself and what got you into music?

Precious Perez:

Absolutely. So I grew up in Chelsea, Massachusetts. I am a first generation college graduate. I just graduated from Berklee College of Music with my double Bachelor's in music and performance. I play ukulele I'm a vocalist, songwriter, multi instrumentalist, you know, the list goes on. I try to do as much as I can and be as versatile as I can. I was classically trained in high school. And then the main genres that I focus on are pop r&b and Latin. But I can also do a lot of other different things. And I like to try different things that I'm not super familiar with. But I first became interested in music because my mom would play everything. I grew up around I would say everything except for rock and country. I was influenced by a lot of r&b a lot of hip hop, pop, you know, like, big artists that I looked up to JLo daddy Yankee, Mariah Carey DMX, and then, like, it's all over the place. 50 cent Tupac, like, it goes everywhere all over the map, you know, Alicia Keys, Taylor Swift, huge songwriting inspiration. I was like a giant fan of hers. And I still am, albeit a little less teenage obsessed. But you know, I grew up surrounded by music, even though my family didn't have, I guess you could say musical talent running in our veins. We had music. And when I was six years old, somebody gave me a Barbie karaoke machine. It was pink, and it had a little tape. I don't know what it's called, you can put it you can insert a tape into it and look like that tape. Yeah, you could play back, you could record you could. So I would turn on the radio. And I would record myself with the little microphone singing along to things. And it was then that I realized, like, I want to be a singer. But that expanded over the years to I'm an artist, I don't just sing, I write songs I perform, I do these different things. And this is what I want to pursue. And you know, that grew over the years, and I've definitely come a long way since then. But that's kind of how it all got started.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's great. And so many of the artists that you listed I'm, I'm a bit older than you. And a lot of that stuff is like, you know, 90s music that I grew up with as a child too. So I love that that's, that's still cool.

Precious Perez:

I would say 90s and 2000s are like some of the best decades for music, but like for me, it's the 2000s That's like the sweet spot, right? And I love old timey music, but like I would say just when I'm on a certain vibe I've been on a 2000s vibe for the past like week or so.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, that's great. And congratulations on graduating also, that's really exciting. So what what role did disability culture and community play in your, in your journey as a musician,

Precious Perez:

so as a blind person, and then a blind person of color as a Puerto Rican woman, and then you have being a woman, on top of that, there's all these different intersections that I grew up navigating, you know, first generation college student, all of these different things, blindness, and then you know, the whole stage presents like, Oh, you have to look a certain way. And, you know, people don't look at you as a blind person, and you're performing, like, Oh, you have to have the whole package, and you have to dance around. And you have to do this and that. And the other thing, it's hard as a disabled person, in these industries in the arts, to get to the same point that your peers might get to, in a shorter timeframe. So I think disability culture is part of my life, it's part of my existence, it's part of my artistry. You know, a huge part of what I do as an artist is advocate for all of the communities that I represent. And one of those is disability, and arguably one of the biggest of those communities is disability. For me, it's a matter of doing the things that I love and showing future generations and other people in my position, that whatever you want to do, it is possible to achieve it. For me, it's bigger than just me getting to a certain point, it represents the ability to show others with disabilities and just the rest of the world that is still consumed by stereotypes and discrimination against us, that we are capable and we are respectable. And we deserve the same respect, because we are equals and should be treated as such. So it's a huge part of my every day, as far as disability culture and music, they just kind of go hand in hand. And for me, like, you know, I'm very open about it. And on top of the, you know, the typical mental health struggles, I mean, I have diagnosed anxiety and depression. And that plays into everything else. And I'm just open about everything I experience. Because, you know, anxiety can be debilitating sometimes itself, and navigating that around disability like, oh, I don't know what I look like, I don't know how to compare this to what I look like, is this, okay? For this performance? Like, does my hair look okay? How are our people looking at me, if I move this way, when I'm dancing? Does it look awkward? I have no way to know. So all of these different things kind of come together in this space as disabled artists in the music industry, and things that you reconcile things that you're always going to be working to overcome. But it is definitely it plays a huge role in all of that.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really beautifully put in I really felt that so the first time I came across your music was when we did that gathering that was led by Conchita Hernandez Legorreta, Melissa Lomax, and Justice, shorter for WOC World, the community for blind women of color. And you played your song Valiente , which we actually used in the episode that I did about WOC World with those three fabulous ladies. And I remember hearing that song and it spoke so deeply to me, I'm also a blind woman of color. And I just felt so connected to that experience. And your message is so valuable for our community. And it really, I experienced exactly what you described, I felt lifted up. And I felt like I could do anything. And I felt that I had others around me with a similar experience that I could look to for wisdom or guidance or support. So it's so true, what you're saying, When was the first time you you started to really come into community with other disabled musicians and artists and what was that like?

Precious Perez:

So it's been a gradual thing. I think a lot of there's a lot of people within the blindness community that are just musicians and they play and they sing and some do it for fun. Some pursue it the way that I'm pursuing it. But I've been around different people my entire life. And then when I went to Berklee, I'm not the only blind student from Berklee. There were like seven of us at any given time, or more.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's amazing.

Precious Perez:

I bonded with them. And I have amazing friendships with all of those people. And I made you know, blind and sighted musician friends and played with both and, you know, now I have this group of friends, you know, made up of Berklee musicians and then friends that are really tight knit. My fiance, Shane Lowe actually founded a radio network called Venom. And we have essentially a bunch of broadcasters who all happen to be blind. And then we also have genre streams. So each stream is curated. We have a Latin stream, and I actually do a radio show on Tuesdays at 6pm. Eastern called Pioneros, which is a Latin centered, just playing hits and songs that I like and interacting. It's really fun. Shameless plug.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's awesome.

Precious Perez:

It's just it's a great experience, because so many of us on that network that hang out all the time that have become so close, are also musicians. Not only are we broadcasters but we're artists. We're instrumentalists. We are we have percussionists, and just audio engineers, so much talent all around. And it's, it's insane to me that, you know, in the world, and outside of this, people don't realize how much talent there really is.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's incredible. And it sounds like you've built such a strong community around you. I'm so blown over by the fact that you had seven other blind students with you at Berklee, I think for many of us who are not artists, I've been in so many environments where I'm always the only blind person and it's so exhausting. Oh, that's such a that's such a gift that, that you had that experience in school. I never had that. So that's so wonderful and empowering. And to that end, one of the reasons that we connected to do this interview was that you recently shared the launch of this really exciting initiative. It's called RAMPD, Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities, that you've been involved with founding. So can you can you tell us a little bit about how RAMPD came to be and what its core mission is?

Precious Perez:

Absolutely. So ramp was founded by award winning artist and advocate, Lachi. Lachi is a powerhouse she is a force to be reckoned with. And her and Gaelynn Lea, who is the vice president built this community, I actually have a friend who goes by Question. Question is a founding member of RAMPD. And last summer, you know, was talking about how membership was opening up for this amazing organization. And I said, Well, I would love to be a part of this. And, and he said, well, the surveys going to come out and apply. So I did. And I was accepted as a professional member. So there's professional members, and there's community members. And so, once I got accepted, and I was included in this incredible initiative, I wanted to get further involved and really just, you know, do the work. So I recently became the membership Chair of RAMPD. So I run the membership committee and, you know, work with the other leaders to ensure that our organization continues to grow, and that we continue to gain representation in the music industry. And our mission itself is to elevate disability culture, to promote inclusion and to advocate for accessibility in the music industry. And, you know, when we say professionals, we're not only polished and talented and all of these things, but we are worth the same as musicians that are sighted or musicians that have that don't have disabilities, we deserve the same payment, the same respect, you know, if if other musicians are getting paid, we should be getting paid as disabled musicians, you know, we are worth it. And we are equals in that sense. So we get paid for what we do, because we've worked for that. And so it's really being in those spaces, getting into those rooms, advocating in the spaces that haven't had this kind of advocacy before, because disability is a diversity that gets lifted out of pretty much every diversity conversation. So this is an opportunity for us, artists with disabilities, musicians with disabilities, business managers with disabilities, label owners with disabilities, all of us to finally stand out in the mainstream and say we are here and we are equal and We deserve the same respect. And that is essentially what RAMPD is we are here to change things to positively impact the industry to be a resource for accessibility in the industry for people to say, Hey, I'm looking for a blind vocalists for I'm looking for a disabled artists to do this and this or I'm just looking for somebody to do these things, we have those people, and we can give them a list of those people to choose from. It really is an incredible organization. We just launched on January 21. And we are fiscally sponsored by Accessible Festivals, which is very exciting. We are partnered with different organizations. And we also are partnered with the Grammy Museum Experience, which is amazing. We've gotten write ups in Billboard, The New York Times, among other published articles in different magazines and things and it's really been amazing to see all of the exposure and the ways that everyone is embracing RAMPD, you know, since its launched.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, I've seen some of those articles. And I watched a part of the the launch event, which was really just a phenomenally done and beautiful experience. And it's so powerful, what you're doing. And what's interesting is, as you said earlier, there have been disabled artists and musicians for time immemorial. But they sort of had to oftentimes had to obscure their disability or their disability was just an invisible part of them. But I think what's special and unique about RAMPD is that it is centering the disabled experience and being sort of loud and proud about that aspect of all of your identity that I think disabled artists and musicians before before this generation before RAMPD , kind of just had to sweep under the rug and blend in, you're saying no, we're not going to blend we're going to we're going to be seen and we're going to be heard and we're going to be given access. So I think that's really that's really amazing. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the organizing strategies that you're using, like just kind of describe what what advocacy tools that you're leveraging to to achieve some of those goals you talked about?

Precious Perez:

Right? So we have partnerships, and we have multiple committees, we have partnerships, we have memberships, we have PR, different committees that focus on different goals, as far as you know, whether it's expanding for for what I do is really expanding our membership and really engaging our membership to do the work on the ground and continue like to endeavor to utilize RAMPD in ways that benefit them but also continuing to benefit the industry through RAMPD as well. I think, you know, the main thing that we utilize is, you know, delegating with each other, communicating with each other, and just continuing to in our own personal networks beyond, and also within the RAMPD circles and networks that we have created, continuing to share opportunities and share different things, to continue moving everything forward. So continuing the movement, elevating the movement in everything that we do as artists, as individuals, and as a whole organization is really a priority. And right now, we have community members, and we have professional members, our membership application is open until February 21. And I encourage anybody who, you know, is a professional musician, or artist to apply. And even if you don't want to apply as a professional artist, or, or musician, you should still apply for a community membership and have access to the newsletter and all the different things that ramped will continue to be doing in the future.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And what's the difference between a professional member and a community member?

Precious Perez:

So a community member kind of engages at a different level where there's access to the newsletter, the goings on different opportunities, professional members have the opportunities to serve on these committees, and, you know, to represent RAMPD in different spaces. We're still in the early stages of everything and still kind of hashing out goals and all of these different things. But you know, every voice is valuable, and we're excited to just keep growing.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's great and what what do you think needs to change in the industry itself? You all are the are change agents and you're Making change. But what structurally do you think needs to be different in the industry to create more space for disabled artists and disabled artists of color in particular?

Precious Perez:

Absolutely. So there are a lot of things that I could talk about. But one thing that we've been, you know, discussing is accessibility for a word shows, including ASL, including self description, which is people describing themselves, when they speak, whether it's their outfit or their personality, and you know, for for the sake of blind people being able to interact and to really engage with the visual aspects in a different way to have ramps visible on stages, you know, in the cameras, people can easily get on off stage, things like that things that aren't currently there, accessibility of venues, touring venues, and other music venues, just overall, those are two really big things that need to change. As far as you know, accessibility and inclusion. The spaces need to be inclusive. And, you know, it's a huge thing for disabled musicians to be able to access the space to be able to do what they need to do in the first place. So those are some big initiatives that we definitely think need to change in the industry, and just the attitude, you know, we deserve to be on the same level as our colleagues, we are professionals. And we're not just talented in our own right. But every professional musician and artist who is disabled, doesn't deserve to be discriminated against, doesn't deserve to have to not disclose in fear of not being able to get a gig or for fear of somebody else's misconceptions about what their capabilities are, and not giving them the job. There, there are so many ways that the industry needs to improve. But that's what we're here for. We're here to help create those solutions, and to be that solution and to say, hey, we can help improve these things. This is how we can make this better. This is how we can help make this better. So that it's a collaborative effort. But the positive impacts and the changes that are necessary do happen.

Qudsiya Naqui:

How do you feel about the reception you're getting from industry players as you ramp ramp up your advocacy.

Precious Perez:

It's amazing. It's amazing. And we're just excited to keep moving forward. Like I'm personally just, I saw my name in a Billboard article like what we can only go up from here. And it's important to just continue doing what I'm doing personally in my role in this movement, and to encourage others to do their role to just keep pushing forward and striving for the change that should be occurring in the industry so that we can be successful in the industry as individuals and to pave the way for other disabled artists and musicians coming after us.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's wonderful. And where can folks find our listeners find your work and also more information about RAMPD?

Precious Perez:

my socials and my music and everything can be found on preciousperezmusica.com. That's my first last name, and then musica music with an a.com. And that is where you can find all of my music, and you can find my Instagram, my Facebook, my Twitter, all of that is linked there. And then for RAMPD information for membership application, the more about us and our mission and what we've done, you can go to rampd.org That's R-A-M-P-D.org. And we're also on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, so feel free to to just get involved, reach out, follow us on all of those things.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Fantastic. Are there other actions that people, disabled artists, allies can do to support your work,

Precious Perez:

spread the word, get involved. And if you can't, you know, allies are welcome as well to be on the community level. So get involved as much as you can. And if it's not something that you feel like you can get super involved in, spread the word about what we're doing and what's happening because, you know, this is important for the entire industry as a whole and for all disabled musicians and artists, not just blind people, not just deaf people, not just people in wheelchairs with different conditions for all of us, because we're all minority, but we deserve to be heard. And we deserve to be on an equal playing field. And so that's a really huge deal.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Precious, for joining me I'm I'm excited to help spread the word about your work and about RAMPD. And we'll share all of these links in the show notes so people can check them out and get involved and spread the word. So, thank you.

Precious Perez:

Thank you so much. This has been awesome.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer ilana Nevins and our social media manager Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo and Eiffel gangsta beats for theme music. You can become part of our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast to join our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally, don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast at Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. Thank you again for your support. And stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it

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