Down to the Struts

Season 8, Episode 3: Disability Glam at the Grammys (And More) with Lachi

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Lachi

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

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**Introduction**

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

Qudsiya Naqui:

Welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts—the podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality, where we uncover the building blocks for a more just inclusive and accessible world. I'm your host, Qudsiya Naqui. Today you'll listen in on my conversation with Lachi. Lachi is an award-winning recording artist, Grammy's board governor, and founder of rampd.org, an organization dedicated to supporting recording artists and music professionals with disabilities. If you want to learn more about Ramped, check out my interview with current RAMPD president, Precious Perez, from Season 5. Lachi and I talked about her love of music and her vision for how disability culture can transform the music industry. Lachi also shared about her experience hosting the pilot episode of Day Al-Mohamed's PBS Masters Series, Renegades. If you want to learn more about Renegades, head back to episode 2 of this season, and my interview with Day. Finally, be sure to listen through to the end of this episode for a very special clip from Lachi’s incredible song Lift Me Up, produced in 2023 to honor the life and legacy of lifelong Disability Rights Advocate and Down to the Struts alum, Judy Heumann. Okay, let's get down to it.

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

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Lachi, it is such an honor to have you on the show. Thank you so much for joining me.

**Lachi:**

I'm really, really excited to be here.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Could you start by introducing yourself to our listeners?

Lachi:

Sure. My name is Lachi. She/her, and I'm a black woman with cornrows. I identify as blind. I am a recording artist, a charting songwriter. I tour globally and public speak, and I do the acting and the writing and all of the things. Pretty much anything that amplifies disability, culture and identity pride , using music, fashion, or storytelling.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

I'm glad you mentioned all of the things because we're going to talk about all of the things.

But first. I'd love to hear about what led you to pursue a career in music.

**Lachi:**

I always had music in my soul. Uh, my mother said instead of kicking as a baby in her stomach, I was playing keys against her. Not sure if that's true. Jury's still out. From a very young age, I was into music. Four or five. And as a kid, that was sort of outcasted growing up, being not fully blind and not fully sighted, I really just took to the book, to the pen, to the keys and wrote songs, wrote poetry, and wrote down my experiences as I navigated a world I didn't understand and that didn't understand me. And as I continued to do that, I recognized that a lot of my confidence came from music, and so I just kept leaning inner and inner, if that's the word, leaning inner to it. And eventually I made this a career there were a lot of twists and turns. My parents wanted me to go the straight and narrow path 'cause I was a black girl with a disability in America. So I can't really blame them for that, but. Eventually I found my path here in music and , I'm so glad I did and I'm not turning back.

Qudsiya Naqui:

When we first met, you talked about your “coming out story.” People can't visibly see your disability. Can you talk about your specific experience with that?

Lachi:

So just the other day, and I know we're gonna talk about this later. , I was on the Grammy's red carpet, in front of the entire world with my glam cane. Like just, hello world, I'm using a cane. I'm blind and I'm fabulous. Right. And I look at that me, and then I look at like the 8-year-old me when I was first told that I should use a cane because I can't see. I can't even imagine the strides that I've taken to get where I am. So when I was first told that I needed to use a cane, I was super young and I thought to myself, I don't need one, because at the end of the day, I can get a roundish, and I just didn't wanna deal with the stigma or deal with, you know, people not thinking I was competitive. So I just never used a cane and I did all that I could to just wing it, trying to run around and figure things out, which actually caused a myriad of other problems and frankly, have caused what I'm learning are like comorbidity, social like anxieties that I have today, because of the fact that the social stigmas led me away from using actually the tools that would allow me to be more independent. So I say all of that because I navigated most of the world's sided passing. And again, my parents being immigrants, my parents wanting the best for me, they were all for it, We didn't talk about it a lot in my family. So I didn't even realize when I got into the workplace, I didn't realize that I was experiencing ableism. The word didn't really exist, even like, you know, five years ago. But I knew something was wrong and I knew that I wasn't all the way myself. I actually thought I may have had some sort of personality disorder. I was like, am I two people?

'cause on the inside I am one true person, but on the outside I'm just this totally different person navigating the world. And then when I jumped head first into the music industry, was when I finally started to realize that I had enough energy to be a whole person as opposed to the person that I was pretending to be when I had my day job. As I continued to navigate the music space, I gained more and more confidence. And as I became more successful in music, I gained more confidence. Then I started working in really great studios, working with Sony music producers, working with Universal music producers, working with household names like Styles P, who's huge in hip hop, or Snoop Dogg, who's very huge in hip hop. I started to think like I'm actually shooting myself in the foot because I'm not accommodating myself. Like I was like tripping in the dark studios, or I was missing really great handshakes in these dark rooms that I have to be at out at night in the dance and electronic and in the hip hop and pop scenes. So I had to make a decision and funnily enough, right at that time my manager was like, I think people wanna know your story. yes, you have a great voice, but like, who are you? And I started to slowly come out and talk a little bit about my experience as a person who navigates with a disability, as a person who's blind. I started, you know, meeting other people and singing at Little Pride parades that were really small and didn't pay me anything. I was just doing them to just get my foot wet into this new community of mine, and then Covid hit. Everything turned on its head. Everybody was indoors, and in fact, disability identity was starting to blow up. We started seeing folks like Molly Burke blow up. We started seeing folks like Lucy Edwards blow up.

Imani Barbarin was blowing up. Like they had a stride in 2018 and 2019, but as soon as Covid hit, they just went viral. Viral. And I was like, holy crap, there's people out here really doing this thing unafraid. What am I afraid of? And so I was like, let's do this in the music industry because no one's doing it. Yeah, Hollywood's doing it a little bit. Corporate America is doing a little bit, but music industry is not. And when I started to navigate the recording Academy and the Grammys, which is, you know. The top dog of music, right? So I'm in there and I'm like, what are you guys doing for disability and accessibility?

And a lot of folks in the industry were like, well, you're one of the first people I've met with a disability other than like Stevie Wonder. And so I was like, oof, that has to change. And then I started talking to more and more people and eventually we put on that panel that we put on with the recording academy, that ended up going viral, just a discussion of disability in the music industry.

And that blew up. People went into my DMS and started saying, Lachi, you need to really start this movement. I didn't want to because I was just like trying to figure out my own career. But then I took the calling and it's been ever since. That that really huge boost in confidence, that boost in community, that acceptance of identity, um, led me to realize like, I can't keep going to these concerts and these red carpets looking fly, but having this like corny little.

White cane. I was still feeling a little something about my white cane and I was at a point where I really needed to start using it. 'cause my vision was just like pretty bad. Like I was giving hugs to friends and then realizing they were trees, you know what I mean? So I ended up wanting to glam my canes and that was a huge boon for me. if I was wearing a spectacular purple dress, I would have a spectacular bedazzled purple cane. And it wasn't corny, it was actually a very luxury, pristine rhinestone cane that matched my luxury, pristine red carpet looks. And I gotta say the full circle is, that is probably the thing that makes me feel the most confident. Especially as it pertains to my disability identity and my blindness, it's what is, it's my combat against erasure. It's my celebration of my identity, and it makes me look fly.

Qudsiya Naqui:

You not only accepted yourself and you really did take that calling and you didn't just get right with yourself. you started a movement, as you said, and for instance, you began Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities, or RAMPD. I interviewed one of your colleagues, Precious Perez, a few seasons ago and got to hear a little bit of the story, but , I wanna hear the rest of the story from your perspective. Can you tell us about what you went on to do then once you were glammed up with your fabulous bedazzled cane and, ready to face the world as a disabled musician?

Lachi:

I have to give a lot of gratitude to RAMPD. Yes, I founded RAMPD, but RAMPD really helped me find myself. RAMPD has been such a joy and such a solution to so many problems for so many people. Very specifically community. RAMPD is an online platform that connects the music industry to tools and, programs in order to amplify disability, culture and awareness. It is also a global directory of music professionals and creators with disabilities, neurodivergence, mental health and chronic conditions that work in any part of the music ecology, and it can be a sound designer, it can be a manager, it can be an agent, or it can be a touring artist or an oboe player. When I first started RAMPD, the first thing I did was try to contact as many people with disabilities or neuro divergences as I could that did anything to do with music. 'Cause I would ask people what is the problem in the music industry that we need to fix. Some people would say accessibility. Some people would say visibility. Some people would say representation, but to a tee, everybody said that they were fed up with the isolation, that they felt that they were doing this by themselves, that they were the only one, that they were the first, that they, there was nobody that they could come to. They can't get a mentorship. Let's say for instance there's a black artist and they join a black music organization and they get a black mentor. There is just so much of the story that that mentor cannot help plug in because they do not have the disability experience. They do not understand disability culture. And that was what kept being the commonality. And so one of the biggest and best things that RAMPD does beyond all of its amazing things that it does, like partnering with the Grammys, partnering with Netflix, partnering with Sony Pictures Entertainment, all of these awesome things that RAMPD does. The best thing that it does is offer community. It offers, it breaks through that isolation. It breaks down those silos , people are collaborating, folks are getting together and traveling to events. Folks are helping each other out and attending each other's shows. You have to get two referrals to get into the Grammys. And folks were thinking, I could never get two referrals. Now they can get a million referrals. People are finding out about not only just events or shows, but programs and paid opportunities that they would've never known about. So this community that we're building through music is huge. One of the bigger gripes that touring artists have is like, how do I get the venue to care about, setting the venue up for my arrival because I have a disability. Maybe I need a ramp, or maybe I need a door person, or maybe I need ASL or whatnot. How do I get them to do what I want? We have members of all levels. We have world touring members that are helping the newer members, who are younger in their careers and turning around and going like, well, a, I can help you make a rider. Listen, I can help vouch for you if you need that help. We're getting members hooked up with managers. It's so hard to find a manager in the music industry, but we have some managers here at RAMPD that are looking for artists with disabilities to manage. And so it's just been such a beautiful thing. I wanna say the last really amazing thing about RAMPD is that because of the way we positioned ourselves, especially with the fact that, our first client was the Grammys, we were able to position ourselves as a leader in the music industry. There hasn't been that for disability and that's what RAMPD is becoming. We are sitting across the table from folks like the Recording Academy, from the CMAs, from Netflix, from everywhere. We're having these conversations about equity, about inclusion and access accessible spaces in a way that is not so grievance bound, that it would scare those kind of folks at the top, the executive decision makers, away. We're telling them that we don't just want you to hire people in the mail room. We want you to have us in your boardroom and to be able to say something like that, you have to be able to sit at the same table, eye to eye with a comparable firm or organization that they have, that they can believe in and trust, and then you get things done. And this is what we have for our membership. We have the ability to get them in front of these firms hired by these organizations and speaking on panels about accessibility at these top venues because of the position that we've made for ourselves. And that's probably apart from the acronym, what I'm most proud of.

Qudsiya Naqui:

The acronym is pretty good though. You gotta give it to yourself. I think that what you're saying is so important because you can go in and air your grievance and scare people into compliance. But instead of doing that, the durable solution is to bring them along with you and say, Hey, disability is pretty cool. Disabled musicians are smart, problem solving, creative, all the things that you value as an industry often and, bring them along as you said. That is how we get to true sort of culture change.

Lachi:

We want people to be jazzed. We don't want people to feel like they have to. We want them to feel like they get to. For so long, folks have thought that disability equals compliance. And frankly, this discussion of amplifying disability culture and accepting disability identity, some of this is radical to the non-disabled mind. And I like that you mentioned sustainability. Being able to have a movement that is sustainable really needs the ability to have folks have allies, have non-disabled people be jazzed about what you're doing so that they can continue to have a growing energy to co conspire with you.

[Up-beat pop beats]

Qudsiya Naqui:

You've mentioned the Grammys a couple of times. RAMPD, and you, had quite a presence at this year's Grammys. I was wondering if you could talk about that experience and what you hope will ultimately come out of the seeds you've sown this year.

Lachi:

RAMPD has been a partner with the Grammys since 2022 we advised them on, , what we would want to see at the Grammys so that folks with disabilities and without disabilities can, be affected by disability inclusion on the biggest night in music in the world. and we advocated for a ramped stage which was granted.

We made sure of captioning and audio description. we advocated for ASL on the red carpet and then we also advocated for disability culture presence. The Second year, um, we were like, you know what, we are gonna actually come in here and just straight up do the accessibility. So we're gonna just hire the folks, hire the contractors, and we're just gonna make it happen. Just give us the money and we're, we are just gonna do it. And they were like, sure. And we got, ASL on the carpet. We, of course, we again had the ramped stage and it was where that year, Kim Petras and Sam Smith did some sort of fire dance on it. So it got its day in the sun, which was a lot of fun. of course there was captioning and ASL inside the stu—everything we had advocated for as well. I had also advocated for me to be on the red carpet., so that I can talk about the access measures and celebrate them with the community. And they granted me the, the red carpet. So I went on there and I spoke to the press and it was a fun time, but I felt very much like, this is me just talking to the press. This isn't really a celebration with a capital C now. It was a, it was great. I gotta say it was really good. We got a lot of word out, but this year we really wanted to celebrate disability culture. So we wanted to take it a whole nother level. Yes, we still wanted to have ASL on the carpet. All of the things that we had the year before, and have that ramped stage, which this year Stevie Wonder played on, which was really fun 'cause we actually had a person with a disability on it. So I was like, let's get the entire ramped executive committee on the red carpet. And they went with it. It was such a beautiful thing because we had white canes, we had wheelchairs, we actually, I don't know if we had white canes. Everybody had a glam cane, so none of the canes were white. But we also had, sign language interpreters, and it was just such a beautiful carpet. We got to speak to outlets and because we got to divide and conquer, we had so many different outlets we could speak to. Precious Perez, who you mentioned earlier, who is currently the president of RAMPD , got to speak to some of the Spanish speaking outlets like Telemundo, which I would, wouldn't have been able to do. It was just such a beautiful thing to be able to have that much representation on the carpet. But we actually had representation all throughout the week. We had other RAMPD members we had, gosh, dozens of RAMPD members in LA during Grammy week going to different parties, bionic folks with different neuro divergences folks showing up with guide dogs. We even threw our own industry party in the middle of the week and it was funny, we had this beautiful accessible spot, in the middle of Hollywood and everybody's like, how did you even get that spot? Amazing food. but the problem was we could only have like 75 people., so very quickly our invite became like everyone was vying for one, and non-disabled people because if you were a member of RAMPD you were automatically able to come. So all disabled people got to come, but it was like non-disabled, just industry folk were trying to get an invite to our party. And it was a party that we threw in conjunction with recording academy members. We even had a tequila sponsor so that we could make it fun and hip. The day of the actual event was just so beautiful. It was like the feel good event of the week. We had Sony reps there, we had Live Nation reps there, we had BMI reps there. We had reps from all of the majors just hanging out with in a room. Where there are people of different races, different colors, different sexual preferences and different disabilities, and the RAMPD logo was just everywhere.

[Up-beat pop beats]

Qudsiya Naqui:

In addition to the music industry, you found many other ways to bring disability culture into the mainstream. In our last episode, we spoke with Day Al-Mohamed, who is the producer of the upcoming PBS Short series, Renegades. You Hosted the pilot episode that came out back in 2021. Can you tell us about that experience , and how that has contributed to your overarching mission of promoting disability culture?

Lachi:

So first and foremost, I was introduced to Day by Judy Heumann, at that time I was doing a YouTube series where I was checking off items on my bucket list of different things I wanted to do and different famous people I wanted to meet. And I was just jumping out of airplanes and spelunking and hanging out with the Blind Boys of Alabama and Molly Burke and all of that. And she caught wind of my YouTube series and she said, you know what, I have this amazing opportunity because I would really love a blind woman of color to host this thing I have going on, and I was like, sure. Let's give this a shot. Little did I know it was this really amazing series about talking about disabled rebels who've helped shape American history. And I wouldn't consider myself a history buff in any way, but I'm a huge fan of things like American Masters and I love to watch documentaries on just like random people that are interesting that a lot of folks don't know anything about until they watch the documentary. When we started talking about how the filming would go, that was when I knew that Day Al-Mohamed was a special human. And we get out there and the episode we worked on was an episode about Kitty O'Neal, who was this speed racer and stunt woman who was deaf, who really just navigated her way to the top in Hollywood, but really didn't get enough due for all the amazing things she did. I am helping continue on the awesome history of this human being. I'm helping propel and continue this story. Like, wow, what a nexus. You know, what an homage to my ancestors, my disabled ancestors. And so this is why this series is actually really important to me. This series of honoring folks with disabilities who came before us, who actually laid the groundwork and built the bricks of our, of our country, of our nation, of our history, of our world, and why we're able to enjoy what we enjoy today. Why I'm able to just get up and say like, I'm disabled and proud, and to celebrate folks who probably didn't have the ability to say that, didn't have the privilege to say that. So I'm really excited about this series. I'm excited to have hosted the pilot, and to continue to work, with that accelerator situation that they're having with different producers and different directors be able to produce and direct the following episodes and the following shorts. I think that's such a beautiful thing to be able to give a lot of disabled producers and directors that credit, that ability to be seen.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Something that I often talk about on the podcast and in my newsletter is the incredible importance of the through line from Kitty O'Neal to you and we don't learn as children. We don't, I didn't learn about Judy Heumann in School. I didn't know anything about the disability, civil rights. Mm-hmm. Story. And as a consequence, I didn't see myself in the past, present, or future. But I think if you can see yourself in the past and understand yourself, then in the present we can move forward and craft a more hopeful future. And that is what you and Day and everyone involved in Renegades is doing and it is so critical and important. So thank you for your contribution. Are there any other projects that you're particularly excited about that are coming up for you?

Lachi:

We're recording a new album called “Mad Different.” It's an album really celebrating the differences that folks have here just trying to navigate this country. But it's really a picture paint.

Of my experience and, the experiences of my community through, pop and dance music. So you're learning something, but you're also moving your butt. Also we're writing a, book right now, a narrative nonfiction called “I Identify As Blind,” and it is a pop culture critique, mixed with memoir that explores the disability and neurodivergent cultures and narratives that are coursing through pop culture that are really under celebrated. And it is through my experiences and the experiences of disabled icons and public figures and political figures, who are navigating public life. So it's really celebrating the disability identity and the disability story. I Identify As Blind. And then other than that, we're touring and performing across the globe. We do a lot of keynote concerts, at universities and cultural centers and venues and conferences.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I look forward to reading and also shaking my butt to your new album. So where can our listeners find you, Lachi?

Lachi:

They can find me on Lachi, L-A-C-H-I, Lachi Music at everywhere that you interact with the world, whether it is on social media or whether it is through Google or whether you just like checking out new music on Spotify, I'm there. I would absolutely appreciate your support, your listen your stream and reach out. every stream counts. I know some people are like, I'm just a person. Like, what does that matter? You are super, super important and it's because of you that, that I can continue to do this work, so please check me out and I'm looking forward to meeting you.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Lachi. It's been a privilege and a pleasure to spend some time with you today.

[The song, “Lift Me Up,” performed by Lachi and James Ian plays in the background]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for listening to Down To The Struts. This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol, With special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. For more about the podcast, visit us at downtothestruts.com. Follow us on Instagram and X at Down to the Struts, and join our Facebook group, Down to the Struts Podcast. You can also subscribe to our newsletter, Getting Down to It on SubStack. You can also find us at our new home on YouTube. And don't forget to subscribe, rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you love to listen. Stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it.