Disability Deep Dive Episode 100: Breaking Sound Barriers: Lachi on Music, Advocacy, and the Future of Entertainment

Keith Casebonne (00:00:14):

What happens when breaking sound barriers isn't just about music, but about changing the whole industry? What does it take to go from performing on stage to leading a movement for real access, and why does it matter who gets to be heard? That's the story behind Breaking Sound Barriers, Lachi on music, advocacy, and the future of entertainment, and it's all coming up on Disability Deep Dive.

Jodi Beckstine (00:00:35):

Hi, welcome to Disability Deep Dive. I'm Jodi.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:41):

And I'm Keith. Today, we're not just celebrating an amazing conversation. We are celebrating a milestone.

Jodi Beckstine (00:00:46):

That's right. It's our 100th episode. This podcast was started as you first with Keith and Maddie hosting, not knowing where it would go or how many incredible voices would get shared along the way.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:59):

Yeah. We want to give a huge thank you to Maddie for all her hard work, passion, and dedication. Honestly, the show wouldn't be where it is now without her help and influence.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:08):

Absolutely. And what better way to mark the 100th episode than with a guest who's breaking sound barriers in every sense? Recording artist, songwriter, advocate, Lachi.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:19):

Yeah. And since we recorded the interview, Lachi has been nominated for a 2026 Grammy as co-producer, co-writer, and performer on the album, The Colors In My Mind, up for Best

New Age, Ambient, or Chant Album. This project shines a spotlight on neurodiversity and disability representation at the highest level.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:40):

And I have to admit her song, I'M THAT, has been on constant repeat for me. Made my year-end Apple wrap-up list, and it gets me through my Fridays and all my weekends. And she has a new book coming out. It's called I Identify as Blind.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:55):

Yeah, so much going on here. And so for our hundredth episode, we are going big. Let's dive in with Lachi.

(00:02:03):

Hello and welcome to Disability Deep Dive, Lachi. To start, can you introduce yourself for listeners who may be meeting you for the first time?

Lachi (00:02:11):

Sure. Well, my name is Lachi and my self-description for blind viewers. I am she/her. I'm a Black woman with cornrows. I identify as blind and neurodivergent. I also identify as an Aries and a New Yorker, so double trouble. I'm a recording artist who's been fortunate enough to work with some pretty cool household names. Touring performer and songwriter. I am also a host who has worked with PBS on American Masters. I am also a GRAMMYs national board of trustees human. So I do a lot of work in the background of the music industry. And I'm also the CEO and founder of RAMPD, Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities, and we are essentially a global network of music creators and professionals with disabilities, neurodivergence, and the like. And we work with everyone from Netflix to Live Nation to the GRAMMYs to make the music industry more accessible. And what else do I do? I am author. I am so many things, but I think at the end of the day, what I really do is I use pop culture and my platform to make disability fun.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:25):

Oh my gosh. Wow.

Jodi Beckstine (00:03:27):

That's very impressive.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:30):

That's like three people's work right there.

Lachi (00:03:32):

Yes, and I'm missing a bunch.

Jodi Beckstine (00:03:36):

I'm sure. Well, let's start a little bit at the beginning. When did music first become part of your life and how did it shape your sense of identity and purpose?

Lachi (00:03:50):

It's so funny. My mom says while other babies were kicking in the womb, I was playing the keys in her stomach, which is funny because I don't know how she fit a keyboard in there, but she's not lying. But from a very young age I've been into music. My parents swore I was going to be some kind of virtuoso, so they got me all the Chopins and the Vivaldis, and I grew up listening to everyone from Lauren Hill and Alicia Keys to Smashing Pumpkins and No Doubt. So I was just very heavily into listening to music, playing music. And as a kid who was legally blind and sort of an outcast, I spent a lot of time with the keys. Getting the world to understand me and getting myself to understand the world came through music, came through drawing, came through comics. So because I had more vision when I was younger, I would draw a lot and I would write poetry.

(00:04:47):

And when I got into college, I would do this thing every Saturday where I would play the piano in our dorm, and it turned into this thing called Piano Nights where a bunch of people would come and listen to the quiet girl play the piano. And everybody was like, "You need to go be famous and move to New York." I was in North Carolina at that time. So I go to my guidance counselor. Okay, here's the pivot point. I go to my guidance counselor and I say, "I want to do music. What classes should I take?" And he goes, "Just move to New York." And I'm thinking to myself, "You're a guidance counselor. You're not supposed to say that." He was in a Beatles cover band. So anyway.

Keith Casebonne (00:05:27):

That helps.

Lachi (00:05:27):

That helps. So listen, I moved to New York and I feel a sense of freedom, I feel a sense of you can be whoever you want. Things are a lot more accessible in New York as a blind person just because you can get around with the trains. You could go there with 20 bucks and the clothes on your back and make something happen. So the city kind of whisked me away. I went to NYU and then I just started to make friends. I really started to bud and open up, and then I got signed to a record deal. So then that's how that took off me.

Jodi Beckstine (00:06:01):

Wow. Amazing.

Lachi (00:06:02):

Music has always been the thing that has given me confidence, the thing that has given me solace, and so of course I'm going to dedicate my life to music, paying homage to music. Music helped me come out about my disability. And so music and advocacy are really just one in my life at this point.

Keith Casebonne (00:06:22):

Oh my gosh. That's beautiful. My experience with guidance counselors is that they would tell you, "Oh, forget the music and the art and the things like that. You need to worry... Focus on the 'real jobs.'" And that's amazing that you had that experience with a guidance counselor. Wow. Life changing.

Lachi (00:06:40):

Well, like I said, he was a little off-kilter, I like to-

Keith Casebonne (00:06:43):

Yeah. No, that's good. Yeah. That's what we need is more off-kilter people.

Lachi (00:06:46):

We need that. So listen, my parents are Nigerian and their daughter has a disability. So obviously they really wanted me to take the straight and narrow path. I was good at math and my dad did accounting, so they wanted me to be an accountant, and I'm just like, "These nails and this face? No."

Jodi Beckstine (00:07:08):

Wasted. Wasted on accounting.

Lachi (00:07:11):

Thank you. You get it.

Keith Casebonne (00:07:12):

You can't click a calculator with those nails. Come on.

Lachi (00:07:15):

No.

Keith Casebonne (00:07:15):

Oh my gosh. Wow. Well, among all the talents, you're also an author, as you mentioned earlier, and you have a new book, Identify as Blind, coming out in January. So what inspired you to write it and what conversations or changes do you hope it sparks?

Lachi (00:07:36):

Ooh, the question. So one of the reasons I was actually inspired to write this book is, so I would go around and do my speaking engagements and they would generally be me speaking to the audience and then eventually hopping on the piano and playing a few songs, and I call them keynote concerts. And the way I open up my keynote concerts would be with sort of like a five to 10 minute comedic open where I would introduce who I am, tell a few jokes, let people calm down. They'd see the cane and they'd go, "Oh my God." Clutch pearl, and I'd be like, "No, we're here for jokes. Calm down. It's fun." But I would open up by saying like, "My name is Lachi and I don't just happen to be blind. Blindness is part of my identity because I didn't really like this idea of just happening to be disabled."

(00:08:24):

But it would take me five minutes to go through like that, and my manager was like, "Can you scrunch up that intro part just a little bit?" So I started to say, "I identify as blind." So to kind of say this is part of my identity as opposed to just happening to me. So then here's the thing, guys. So I started going on these kind of like mega platforms. Let's say for instance, a Google commercial or my first PBS spot and we would be talking about things and then they'd introduce me and I'd say, "Well, my name is Lachi and I identify as blind." Okay, so whatever. I would go into the comments days later and we all know today that the comments are similar to like post-apocalyptic war landscapes, right?

Keith Casebonne (00:09:14):

Yes. Never read the comments.

Lachi (00:09:16):

Well, enter me. I mean, I'm all like, "They're people, right? We can all get along." Yeah, no. They are faceless internet trolls that live beneath little troll bridges. But what I found was people were like, "Oh my gosh, how can you identify as blind? You are either blind or not," or, "Blindness can't be an identity. It's a medical condition. Does she know what she's talking about?" And I'm sitting here like, "Guys, we just broke down some really deep academic stuff in this video. Is anybody going to talk about it?" And I got to say though, I was really energized by this because we have, for the lack of a better term, normies out here talking about disability. Your Average Joe that wanted to watch a little Google commercial or wanted to watch a PBS thing on Ray Charles are sitting here talking about blindness, identity, disability, getting into deep dive conversations. And so of course, if everywhere I go, people are triggered by me saying that, bam, I'm like, "That's obviously the title of my first big book."

(00:10:28):

Really what this book is though is this idea of taking disability into the pop culture realm, looking at it through the pop culture lens because a lot of books I've read on disability are great, but they come off a little academic, some may be a little didactic and some may be a bit sad. So I thought, let's have a lot of fun. So really what this book is, it uses sort of storytellings of my own story and my own come up of trying to like this wacky world of trying to become famous in any way as a blind woman in America and other folks' stories. I have a bunch of really great interviews from other pop culture leaders who identify disabled or neurodivergent or having a chronic or mental health condition along with pop culture critiques, historical deep dives, jokes and rap bars all in one book.

(00:11:24):

And I had the honor to speak with some of the most amazing people, everyone from Senator Tammy Duckworth to RJ Mitte of Breaking Bad to Imani Barbarin, who's a really huge sort of TikToker, to Coldplay who do super accessible tours and beyond, Cat Cohen, who's a great comedian, et cetera, et cetera. And so this book really is sort of a fun, positive, and I won't say light, there's a lot of levity and a lot of fun peppered in some real discussion so that we can sort of allow the sugar to help the medicine go down.

(00:12:09):

But I think most importantly, what I want to do with this book is to allow people to dip toe without fear into discussions of disability and the identity and the power that comes with the disability identity and also encourage them to perhaps unmask themselves. For anyone who just happens to have a disability, encourage them to identify and let folks know that disability culture and identity come with drive, pride, determination, and problem solving skills and all of these skills and visionary that comes with navigating a world that wasn't built for you. And to lean into that, to lean into what society may allow you to think is limiting and to recognize the strength in that. MacGyver yourself. Maybe that's what I should have...

Keith Casebonne (00:13:01):

There you go.

Lachi (00:13:02):

I'm very, very excited publishing it through Penguin Random House, an imprint called Tiny Rep, under Phoebe Robinson, who herself is a comedian. So they've been a really great family. So I'm really excited to print this out in the world.

Keith Casebonne (00:13:15):

That's exciting.

Jodi Beckstine (00:13:16):

I can't wait to get my hands

Keith Casebonne (00:13:17):

I know. Same. Oh my gosh. It's exciting.

Lachi (00:13:19):

Yeah, yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (00:13:22):

Well, switching gears just a little bit, let's talk about RAMPD. What was the moment or experience that inspired you to launch RAMPD and how has it grown or changed since it started?

Lachi (00:13:37):

Yeah. Gosh, RAMPD is one of my favorite things to talk about. So first and foremost, the acronym, is it not gorgeous? Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities, RAMPD. How has no one done that? How has nobody done that?

Jodi Beckstine (00:13:52):

It was waiting for you.

Keith Casebonne (00:13:53):

That's right. That's right.

Lachi (00:13:54):

Yes, girl. So as a recording artist, I play the piano, I write songs. So when I was young, I got signed to a major record deal. Actually, I got spotted at a South by Southwest. That will never happen today. So I get signed to a record deal and it's so funny because I'm a dumb kid, and I have a band, which is my friends, and we're all sort of different dimensions of blind. Some are high partial, low partial, like fully blind, and me who was just a combination of partial in one eye, blind in the other, et cetera. And we just were friends that played music together. We get signed, we're starting to tour, we're going on Oprah Radio. We're just like, "Everything's just blowing up."

(00:14:43):

Here's the problem. So they were marketing us as a blind band or a blind singer or a blindness and a blind that, and I didn't like the shtick. And it's so funny because when I tell people that, they're like, "Lachi, you say that today. You're like, 'I'm blind,' and you're fine with it." But back then, it wasn't coming from a place of my own power, it was coming from their sort of charity model, let's try to market off this sort of model that I was not feeling. And even in the first steps into my 20s, I recognized I didn't like that. And so I end up leaving this big deal of a lifetime. I mean, I could be blind Beyonce right now. I leave this deal of a lifetime because it's just a bad feeling in my stomach.

(00:15:32):

I end up leaving the music industry for some time. I go through the stages of grief and depression about my music career, but music calls me back. I end up getting signed again to a management agency that signs me as a songwriter. So I'm writing songs for bigger artists and it was a great situation. I'm in the background and I'm just kind of collecting money and doing the writing and I was fine with it. I'm getting to a point, I swear. And my manager at the time is like... He's getting me into these bigger and better rooms and I'm starting to go into these rooms and I'm laying down vocals for the demos and things are happening where I'm tripping over wires. I'm hitting my head on the booth. I can't see the engineer. He's got the computer up in front of everyone to show us what he's cutting and pasting and I can't see it, and then he'll say, "Hey, should I move this here?" And I'll just go, "Sure," and all of a sudden the song was deleted or whatever.

(00:16:31):

So I started to realize I need to advocate for myself in these bigger rooms so that I can do my job, so that I can be the best at this thing or I will plateau or I'll stop being invited back because people won't get it. And so honestly, it was just a career need for me to do my best that started my journey and advocacy in the music industry. And I got to say, a lot of the studios and a lot of these kind of one-off situations were pretty accommodating like the best they could be because they wanted me to come in and do my best. So they're like, "Okay. Well, what do you need?" Da-da-da. But as I started going up and talking to organizations and really started speaking to broader labels, I would say, "Hey, what are you..." I stopped just asking about my own access needs and started asking them, what are they doing for accessibility? And they would say stuff like, "It's just you and Stevie Wonder here in these streets. So what do you want us to do for the two of you?"

(00:17:27):

And I knew that had to be wrong. I knew that there had to be... Because I was masking and there's no way I was the only one, and so I was like, "There's got to be tons of people out here masking and just they don't want to lose a gig. They don't want to lose a relationship, and so they're just doing their best to downplay it and mask it." And so I said, "I am not going to get anywhere with the one voice." So I started kind of looking around for other folks. So during this time, I was in the Recording Academy, the folks who run the GRAMMYs and I was just a member and somebody came to me and... I was in some sort of big round table and somebody handed me the mic because everybody was saying their names and it was just like, "Say your name and where you're from," and people was like, "I'm Peggy from Ohio and I drive a truck."

(00:18:18):

And so someone gives me the mic and I'm like, "So I'm Lachi, I'm from New York, I'm blind." And you couldn't use pliers to take that mic away from me. I went in on disability, on accessibility and music, and just really saying that these were the things I was passionate about and I wanted to know if anybody else cares about this or wants to talk about this, please come see me, my DMs are open. And so then somehow everybody was just really energized and it got to the top and they were like, "Lachi, the GRAMMYs wants to do a panel with you about disability."

(00:18:56):

So setting the scene, this is 2021 April. So this is like the depths of COVID and everybody's tearing their hair out saying, "When is the next season of Bridgerton coming out? Because

I'm very bored." So I am really excited. I ended up putting a panel together of a few of the friends that I'd been meeting on Clubhouse or Instagram DMs that knew that I had a disability in the music industry and just loved what I was doing. So I put this panel together, we're talking opposite GRAMMYs leadership about disability, about accessibility. It's a very low-touch conversation because I don't even really know what I'm talking about. I read Disability Visibility and thought I was some kind of freedom fighter. So essentially this panel was the only panel about disability that was going on right now in the music industry and it blew up.

(00:19:51):

It went viral or at least for a GRAMMYs panel, it went really big and I was the moderator. So I started getting emails, I started getting DMs, I started getting whatevers of people going like, "Oh my God, Lachi, I want to be a part of your organization. I want to be a part of your movement. I'm here. I have a disability. I want to be a part of it." And my reaction was... I was like, "Movement?" I was like, "Organization? What are you guys talking about? I'm some kid. I'm a singer." So that's kind of where the calling came. The flooding was too much. I went to sleep and woke up and then the acronym RAMPD came, and so it was kind of God going, "I saved that for you," and RAMPD was born. And I to this day have a really great relationship with the GRAMMYs and the Recording Academy and they became our first partner.

(00:20:48):

But I want to say one last thing. So when we started RAMPD, it started out 12 people on a Zoom, and then we were meeting biweekly trying to figure out what we wanted to do, what did we want to tackle, who were we, what was going on, and people were listening and looking and watching and going like, "Well, what is this new interesting thing going to be?" By January of 2022... So remember, that panel was in April of 2021. So by January of 2022, we were consulting the GRAMMYs on accessibility. So they were our first partner and our first client, and because of that, we got a ton of press. We got in New York Times, we got into Billboard, we got into Forbes, we got into Hollywood Reporter, and because of that, we started getting more partnerships and more members, and let me tell you, we started getting paychecks and we didn't have a bank account.

Jodi Beckstine (00:21:43):

What a great problem to have.

Keith Casebonne (00:21:44):

Yeah, right?

Lachi (00:21:44):

We're like, "How do I run an organization? What am I doing?"

Keith Casebonne (00:21:48):

Oh, wow.

Lachi (00:21:51):

So it was really great. I had really great mentors in Valeisha Butterfield at the GRAMMYs and Judy Heumann, who was really one of my really great friends and a great mentor. And I just had a lot of really great support to start RAMPD. And today we are over a hundred professional members and over a thousand community members, meaning you don't have to be a music professional, and we are working with all of the top music agencies. We're providing trainings, we're providing consultancies. And then for our membership, we're offering programming, everything from songwriting retreats to mentorship programs to big mixers, which we call disco house mixers, disability community house mixers with everyone from, again, South by Southwest, the American Association of Independent Music. We've won tons of awards. We are in deep with the Ford Foundation. I mean, it's just been such a beautiful blossom and it's been probably one of the greatest sort of achievements of... I mean, listen, I've worked with everyone from Snoop Dogg to the Black Eyes Peas, and I got to say RAMPD is probably one of my golden achievements of my life.

Jodi Beckstine (00:23:04):

Wow. That is amazing. It's like a runaway train. You just got on it and it's just going.

Keith Casebonne (00:23:10):

Yeah. Yeah. Wow. Yeah, that is incredible. What a ride. And so considering the kind of work that you're doing through RAMPD, and you've touched on this a little bit, just talking about your story, but you've clearly challenged so many barriers in music and entertainment. So what have been some of your biggest hurdles and how did you navigate them?

Lachi (00:23:38):

I think for most people with disabilities, and I'm very much generalizing and using anecdotal thought, but I would think that for most folks with disabilities in any industry, whether it's entertainment or music, it's going to be the idea of disclosure, and even if you are a wheelchair user and it's very evident that you have a disability, it's just still this idea of being able to proudly sit or be in that skin and allow yourself to feel comfortable regardless of how other folks feel. And so we'll do all these gymnastics to try to make everyone see us as "normal" when the truth of the matter is the most normal thing is having to navigate the world differently because everybody has to.

(00:24:32):

But I would say a big hurdle, a big pivotal moment for me was I didn't use to use the cane. So today I use... Anyone who knows me knows that I use these glamorous bejeweled canes and I call them my glam canes and they come in different colors, different jewels matching all my different outfits. But when I was young, I remember when I was eight years old, the social worker told my mom I need to use a white cane, and I said, "People are all staring at me for sitting in the front of the classroom with my large print. They're making fun of me for the way I have to use a magnifier. So I am absolutely not using a cane. That is just make fun of me central."

(00:25:16):

And so I didn't use the cane. And my mom had six other kids. She was like, "All right, fine. Let me deal with the rest." So I didn't use a cane and it's not like the teasing and the kind of being outcasted stopped, but what did stop was my ability to fricking navigate around the world and do stuff. So I was kind of shooting myself in the foot not using the cane, but I had convinced myself or society had convinced me that I did not want to use the cane. And obviously it's internalized ableism.

(00:25:51):

So I remember around late 2016, I was told by my eye doctor that I was going to begin a path from low vision to no vision. And so I was like, "Oh, yay. That's awesome." And then by 2019, I was in a situation where I had to start using a cane. I was hugging old friends and recognizing that they were trees, things like that. So I needed to start using the cane. And so I remember my manager at the time, he was like, "We're going to go to our first big GRAMMY party." So this was actually before I got in with the GRAMMYs. In fact, this party was where it all kind of started, but he was like, "Let's go to this party. We got invited. Let's go," and I was like, "Oh my God, okay. This is my first big GRAMMY party. What am I going to do?" I got all dressed up. I'm so pretty. I got my makeup.

(00:26:47):

And then I was like, "Well, I'm going to need my cane because I can't walk around without it," and so I was like, "My manager's going to be there. I'm going to be on his arm. It's going to be fine. I'm going to do it." So I have the cane, I go, I get the Uber, I'm in the Uber on my way to the party, my manager calls and he says, "And guess what? I'm a flake, so I'm not going, but you'll be fine."

Keith Casebonne (00:27:17):

Oh, wow.

Lachi (00:27:18):

Guy, I just planned my whole coming out story around you being there, and the moral is don't depend on other humans.

Keith Casebonne (00:27:29):

So true.

Lachi (00:27:30):

Well, I go out and I still go. I still go. And I walk in with my cane, I walk into the party freaking out, and first and foremost, this woman comes up to me and she goes, "Hey, Lachi, cool cane. Want a drink?"

Jodi Beckstine (00:27:51):

And it turned out-

Lachi (00:27:51):

Exactly. It was just one of my friends who I already knew who was-

Keith Casebonne (00:27:52):

Oh, yeah. Okay.

Lachi (00:27:53):

Yeah, and she's like, "Let's go." And what ended up happening for the rest of the night... First and foremost, I always had a problem when I would go to industry events. I would go and I'd stay as a wallflower in the background because I didn't know how to approach people, I couldn't see people. I had been invited to a big industry event by a big A&R that wanted to sign me and I went and I couldn't find him, and so I left and I felt awkward. Meanwhile, I found out later that he was there and felt snubbed because I walked off.

(00:28:24):

It was why I started really recognizing I needed the cane. And throughout that GRAMMY party, people were coming up to me saying hello three or four different times because I kept forgetting who... Because I couldn't see. I was like, "Oh, yeah. You again. Okay." People are buying me drinks. It was a conversation starter, but also my reputation had already preceded me. I mean, I was doing stuff in great rooms and great places, and so it was the same Lachi with a cane. The hardest part was me getting over my own internalized ableism. So all that is to say.

Jodi Beckstine (00:29:00):

I'm only 4'6" and I suffered through school. I went to school before IEPs and before all accommodations at school and I could have carried a stool with me and made my life so much easier, but I refused. I didn't want... As if being 4'6" wasn't enough for people to see that I was different, having a stool was like the worst thing ever. That was definitely putting a spotlight on it and I just refused, and it took me a long time to just realize why should I be uncomfortable just to make other people comfortable in the room?

Lachi (00:29:34):

Why should you detriment yourself from the cool things you can achieve when you're accommodated?

Jodi Beckstine (00:29:39):

Yep, absolutely. Absolutely. So how does this lived experience as a person with a disability influences the stories you want to tell and the sound that you create with music?

Lachi (00:29:51):

Yeah. So my disability today infiltrates pretty much everything I do, like you said, from my music to my writing to everything, and today right now, I'm on this kick of releasing song projects that are essentially me rapping about the fact that my drive, my determination, my overcoming, my problem-solving. So I have a couple of songs. I have a song called Professional where I talk about a lot of times I'll walk right into the room and people assume I'm not a professional, and then I have got to constantly prove that I'm a professional. But the truth of the matter is I'm a professional in here and I'm a professional out there, and instead of proving to you that I'm a professional, I'm just going to be a professional.

(00:30:44):

I have a song called Life on Hard, which is currently kind of making the rounds, and it is about how I navigate and win while playing life on the hardest setting. You ever play a video game and you crank it up to the hardest setting? You know that feeling you get when you actually win at the hardest setting, but meanwhile, your friends and colleagues are losing on the easy setting?

Jodi Beckstine (00:31:08):

Yeah.

Lachi (00:31:09):

That's essentially the sentiment of Life on Hard. And then I've got another song called The Bag, which is about how I have a disability and I still deserve as much as everybody else does, so throw it all in the bag. So these are the kinds of messages I love to put out with my music. I've put out a song called Lift Me Up. This I put out a year and a half ago about Judy Heumann. I'm really celebrating the disability community. So there's something else I want to talk about though, not just the lyrics of the song and the swagger of the songs, but the visuals of the song.

(00:31:45):

So in my artistry, I love to, when creating music videos and sort of these larger music video projects, I love to incorporate as much disability culture as possible. So A, in my social media shorts, I always have my struts with the cane. So I'm always strutting around with the cane. Everybody sees the cane, it's very front and center. With my larger music video projects, I include as much sign language front and center as possible. I love to incorporate someone doing a quick audio description at the top of my music videos to let blind viewers know what's going to be happening in the music video. We incorporate captioning as well. And for my live shows, I actually perform with this amazing woman who is a sign language performer named Indi Robinson, and for our live shows, I'll be at the piano singing and making jokes and she'll be beside me on the stage, not off to the side, signing artistically to kind of-

Keith Casebonne (00:32:47):

Fantastic.

Lachi (00:32:48):

I don't want just any old sign language interpreter, I want somebody who can give it sort of the swagger that I give it. And so from the sort of Instagram and TikTok posts to the music videos to the live show, we do what we can to incorporate as much disability culture as possible. We want to make sure that the art is competitive and compelling so that I could sit beside the art of a Chappell Roan or a whatever, any other person putting out art without folks trying to give it a pity card or a charity card, and it's just great art while also advocating for disability identity.

Jodi Beckstine (00:33:26):

Yes.

Keith Casebonne (00:33:27):

Wow. That's beautiful. I love that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:33:29):

That's fantastic.

Keith Casebonne (00:33:30):

Yeah. That's amazing. So if you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about the music industry for future artists with disabilities, what would it be and what can others do to help move toward that change?

Lachi (00:33:48):

If I could change one thing with a magic wand, it would be honestly... Well, listen, the music industry has a lot of problems. I don't care if you're disabled or what. I mean, it's one of the most exploitative industries and it's one of the most capitalistic industries because not only are you saying we want to exploit art and exploit humans for their art, but the humans are saying, "Hey, exploit me, pick me."

Keith Casebonne (00:34:27):

Right, right. Yeah.

Lachi (00:34:30):

But one thing that I would love to change would be this idea of masking. This is really rampant, whether it is machismo, whether it is women thinking they have to look a certain way, whether it's Black folk thinking they have to act a certain way, whether it's people who get into the room and thinking they have to behave a certain way, whether it's people thinking they have to make their music a certain way, whether it is folks with disabilities thinking they have to try to make everybody feel comfortable. I think that... And this is obviously this is beyond the music industry, this is Corporate America, this is the education system. I believe that if the folks at the top would be open about their differences, their disabilities, their vulnerabilities, their neurodivergences, their whatevers, it will create a trickle-down effect.

(00:35:29):

So I was talking to someone over at Microsoft and they were talking about how... Someone high up at Microsoft and they were talking about how... Oh, yes. I started talking about the fact that I have OCD. I told that to my team, my team of folks. And when he told his team that he had OCD and that it was not just, "Oh, I'm OCD." It was like he actually is diagnosed with OCD, he works through it, he told that to his team, and then the team felt a lot more comfortable, A, bringing their out of the box ideas to the table, being more vulnerable, allowing their lived experience to come into the team, and then his team was more productive than other teams. And so this is the kind of thing that I believe folks who start to find some power, some footholds, some voice should do. I want to take that paintbrush, take that magic wand or take the magic eraser pencil... Anybody using those new phone features where you can just click on it and it just erases all the people in the background?

Keith Casebonne (00:36:37):

Right, right. Yeah.

Lachi (00:36:39):

What kind of magic voodoo... But anyway. I want to take that magic eraser and erase all that stigma, erase all that inauthenticity, erase all of that fear, erase all those masks and really paint a brush of authenticity, paint a brush of self-acceptance because what will end up happening is we will start to get this sort of new... We'll cartwheel into this new reality that breaks those stigmas, this new reality that ableism is honestly something to be internalized and something to carry with you. No, at the end of the day, everything is ableism. Everything is ableism. Sexism is ableism because saying, "Oh, women are weak or unintelligent." I mean, those are ableist things that you're describing. Racism is ableism, saying certain people are not as intelligent or certain people are not able to achieve a certain amount. Homophobia is ableism. And so at the end of the day, if we are proud of our disability, we're essentially saying, "Screw pathologizing things. Screw all this ableism. We're cutting right to the root." So I want to take that paintbrush and cut out all the ableism.

Keith Casebonne (00:38:04):

Nice. Brilliant. I love it.

Jodi Beckstine (00:38:07):

That's a great analogy. I love that. I love that. Well, before we wrap up, at the end of every episode, we do what we call the Deep Cut and we talk about a piece of media that kind of goes with the theme of the show. So is there a book, a film, show, piece of music besides your own that reflects your work or what's been on your mind lately or just something that you enjoy?

Lachi (00:38:32):

Oh. Well, I'm going to say this and people are going to say I'm brown nosing, but whatever, I am. So recently, just to kind of get me pumped up for the release of this book, I've been scarfing down Phoebe Robinson's books and Phoebe Robinson, she's the owner of the imprint Tiny Rep under Penguin Random House that this book is signed to. So thank you, Phoebe. You're fabulous, honey. But I've been inhaling her books, and the reason I have been is because she's not only a great storyteller, but she does this really great job of sprinkling humor into conversations about feminism and things of that nature, and so then I don't have to feel like I'm reading like a freedom fighter book because I'm just laughing the whole time, and by the time I'm done reading it, I feel super charged and... I feel like a whole feminist.

(00:39:26):

But I didn't have to feel that way while reading it, and I feel like that's really, really powerful to be able to use humor to get your point across so that people don't feel alienated or whatever. And she still hits home these hard points. And so I've been reading her books. She's got several bestsellers, which I'm trying to be, still trying to be her a little bit. And so in Identify as Blind, I use a lot, lot, lot of humor, a lot of discussion-y... I want you to feel like you're just sitting in the living room talking to me, and that's how her books feel. So I'm going to give a huge shout-out to Phoebe Robinson. I will admit that I am brown nosing, but the books are very good, so I would recommend folks check her out as well.

Jodi Beckstine (00:40:13):

Fantastic. I definitely will.

Keith Casebonne (00:40:15):

Excellent. Yeah, for sure. Wow. I mean, this has been great. Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Lachi. This is such a fun conversation. Again, thank you so much for giving us your time and we couldn't be more happy and more honored to have had you here on this episode of Disability Deep Dive.

Lachi (00:40:37):

What a pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for having me. You guys are amazing and you have great taste for bringing me on.

Jodi Beckstine (00:40:44):

Definitely. I would agree with that.

Keith Casebonne (00:40:46):

Absolutely. Great. Don't go anywhere. Our Deep Cut is next.

(00:40:53):

Today we're looking at a film that asks, when your whole world changes, what does it take to start again? Sound of Metal follows Ruben, a heavy metal drummer whose world is upended by sudden hearing loss. Instead of chasing easy fixes, the film invites us into the hard, honest work of adapting, discovering new community, new language, and maybe a new sense of self along the way.

Jodi Beckstine (00:41:15):

Sound of Metal isn't just about hearing loss, it's what happens when your sense of self and belonging when everything changes. How does the film show Ruben wrestling with identity both as a musician and as someone who's new to the Deaf culture?

Keith Casebonne (00:41:30):

Yeah. I mean, that's the basis of the whole chunk of the movie really, is that it's about how he deals with this as a person, who he is, and it's really... He obviously goes through a lot of challenges, and I guess as anyone would, and especially someone who their whole life is based on sound and the ability to hear sound, obviously. So of course, I think that struggle with something that anyone would go through, whether you're the most sort of in tune with disability advocacy and things like that, anything that changes in your life is going to be a struggle, and I think that this movie shows that really well, especially considering when you add in the fact...

(00:42:24):

Some of this stuff isn't apparent in the beginning, but when you kind of think about it and go back in your head and go, "He's an addict." And you can still have addictive behaviors even if you're not currently using the drug or whatever it was that your addiction was... He had been clean, I think it was four years, but you still have that in you, and I think that impacted a lot of his actions throughout the movie.

Jodi Beckstine (00:42:58):

Yeah, I like how it didn't just focus on his change to having a disability. When your life falls apart for whatever reason, there is grief, but there's also this chance to build something new and make these changes, and he had that opportunity. He had done it once before when he got clean and now it's a new time in his life, a new change, a new way to grow. And I think that's difficult for a lot of people once there's such a drastic change, but people can become disabled or have any other change in their life in an instant, and it's how you deal with that. And it was an interesting way to see him, how he met that challenge.

Keith Casebonne (00:43:53):

Yeah. Yeah, I agree. And I think it was really interesting that he, in a sense, had to go back to school and... I mean with the kids. And so I think that was an interesting way of showing, yeah, you are having to relearn as if you were a child in a sense. You have to accept that to some degree and understand that there's a new... I mean, you learn a new language essentially, and as an adult, that's not easy for most people. So yeah, it's interesting. And then another thing that they really dive into is the Deaf community, that there is this very, very strong, well-established community of people who are Deaf and it's not a disability to them essentially. I mean, it's life.

(00:44:54):

And you can see when he's first there with Joe, he's totally out of place, he doesn't understand any of it, he doesn't get it. He's sitting at the table and they're all communicating and he just doesn't really know what's going on, and you can see that fish out of water feeling. I mean, you can just totally, totally get it as he's sitting there. And it's interesting how he goes through that process. He starts learning sign language, he starts getting a little more accustomed to it and he starts communicating with everybody, seemingly building up some friendships, and you can see all that happening, and then in a weird way when he...

(00:45:38):

So later he gets cochlear implants anyway, and we'll dive into some of the decisions about that too separately, but I think he still realizes he's a fish out of water because even with the implants, he's still having a hard time communicating, like in a party with tons of voices, it's all too much and it's just tons of noise in his head. I love that the idea sound of metal, it's both the music he played in the beginning, but it's sort of what it sounded like, with the implants just sounds like this metal, tinny, just, I don't know, very harsh sound. And so I think he still realizes ultimately he's in a different place and-

Jodi Beckstine (00:46:31):

Yeah. Everything's changed.

Keith Casebonne (00:46:33):

Better or worse. I mean, it's just another... Yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (00:46:37):

And to him, his immediate reaction was, "What do we do to fix it? I need to get this fixed so I can continue with my life." And fixing isn't always perfect. And it's tough to watch that for him and to see... I could see myself in that position and how I would deal with things, and it's a hard watch. And I listened to it in earphones when I watched it and I was deeply frustrated and annoyed with the sound and it really puts you in it.

Keith Casebonne (00:47:24):

For sure. Well, as we alluded to already, the film takes us deep inside the Deaf community and its values. So what did you notice about how the Deaf characters lived, connected and communicated, especially compared to Ruben's old life?

Jodi Beckstine (00:47:42):

Well, the Deaf community is more... The way they represented it was more physical connection, a lot more eye contact, a lot more touch, banging on tables, light switches on and off, and I noticed with Ruben in the beginning, he didn't make a lot of eye contact when speaking with his girlfriend and then when speaking when he first got to the compound of everybody, and I would notice they were speaking and you know how they had the words on the screen because he hadn't learned ASL yet, and he's looking down, expecting to hear the person in the room speaking to him, and then, "Oh, I have to look up and read." And I noticed that slowly over time, he started looking at the people that were around him and noticing what they were doing and picking up on that.

(00:48:35):

So you have to be more present, you have to be in it, and like I had told you earlier, I tried to watch the movie on my second screen while I was trying to get some work done and it's not that kind of movie. You have to be present, you have to be in the moment, and I think it was a very fish out of water in that aspect for Ruben. And again, how they used the sound to really show you his experience. In the beginning when things started getting... The high-pitched things and things started getting muffled and more muffled and more muffled till there was silence. As a person who can hear, that is frustrating, that is disorienting to it, but it allowed us to kind of feel the loss with him, and then it made the ending even more powerful. It's not just a physical growth for him, it was this emotional growth. And the film lets you experience it and then kind of sit in that and not everything has a happy resolution in the end.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:54):

Right. Right. I think it was really interesting in the way the story was put together that he goes to this... I don't even know what you would call it necessarily. I don't know, it's a community. I don't even know what to call it. It wasn't like a facility or anything like that, but he goes to this almost like a ranch in a way run by Joe, the character Jodi mentioned earlier, and I really think that Joe's influence on him, while Ruben doesn't really get it immediately or for a while, quite honestly, but the influence... I found that the character of Joe is almost like a yogi or the spirit guide or the Jedi or whatever of the movie, and you don't really see it that way right away, and Ruben certainly doesn't, but the way he sort of calmly and directly leads the group and communicates with Ruben and tries to make him understand the power of silence and the power of being still and being still with your own thoughts.

(00:51:20):

And a lot of that isn't even... I had, before we were recording, as we were talking, the idea that the next day or that night or whatever, I'm thinking about the movie and more of this stuff is sinking in and I'm like, "Oh, yeah. Oh, I didn't think about that part." I think it'd be a good movie to rewatch actually because I feel like I would completely see things that I missed before. But yeah, I thought that that whole middle segment of the movie was really interesting and well-written and so cool because you could have written a story about an individual struggle with hearing loss and so on without that element, but I don't think you could have really nailed the message like they did without that element, and him literally being in that community, forcing himself to sit there and at least try, it seems like it's successful and then it's not and then it is again. But I don't know, I thought the development of that whole sort of middle section of the movie was really incredible and well-thought-out and a wonderful way to teach the lessons that ultimately Ruben learns.

Jodi Beckstine (00:52:49):

Yeah. When he showed up to meet Joe, I thought he was just a blip in the movie. It was going to be this AA/DA type of sponsor relationship and he's going to talk him off the ledge a little bit and then we're going to move on, and then it kind of went into, "Oh. No, you're going to be part of the school. We're going to teach you ASL. You're going to be part of this community." And so the sponsor part kind of went off to the side for me and it was, oh, he's introducing him more to the Deaf community. That's not really what it is. But then it kind of came back to that when he was sit and write. And so it was like this duality of, yes, you're part of this community, but you still have this to deal with.

(00:53:33):

Yes, you've been clean, but now it's going to rear its ugly head up again because of this big dramatic thing that has happened in your life and I'm going to help you with that too, but you still have work to do in both communities. And I really liked that. I really felt that that was strong in the film and you got it. Like I said, I kind of pushed that aside and dealt with the Deaf community portion, and then those things started coming back in, I'm like, "Ah, I see where this is going." So we had mentioned there's not a really big tidy wrapped up in a bow ending for this. Why do you think the film and the filmmakers resist doing that and how did that make you feel as a viewer?

Keith Casebonne (00:54:26):

Yeah, this was another thing we were kind of chatting about. The movie ends and the way it ends, I just kind of was like, "Wait, what? No. What? No." But you have to sit with it. A couple hours later and again, the next day I was, "Oh yeah, I get it. Okay." It's something you have to really sit with. So in the moment, I think the resistance of a tidy ending is off-putting, but that's okay. The whole thing is... I mean, it's about discomfort, it's about change and it's about learning and growing, and so I think in the end, that's maybe the perfect way to end a movie like that. There's no automatic fix-it tropes, things like that, and that's good because that's not how the world works. In so many movies, that's how it ends, it gets fixed or whatever, and that's not reality, and so I'm glad that they didn't try to do something like that. So yeah, it's a movie that makes you think and you don't forget it for a couple days or so. You're always sort of reevaluating it in your head.

Jodi Beckstine (00:55:44):

Yeah, definitely. We'd say all the time that disability is this spectrum and as someone who is born with a disability, that's all I've known, and it's different for someone who develops a disability, whether accident, illness, whatever. And the issues that come with disability don't always get solved with technology or this big inspirational movement, and for some people it's embraced and for some people it's tolerated and some people just try to survive, and I think they were able to kind of touch on that a little bit and it made it more true to the reality of dealing with a disability and life isn't wrapped up. People don't always get perfect closure and the ability to move forward. So I think they did their best to try to make it as close to a lived experience as they could, and I appreciated that.

Keith Casebonne (00:56:49):

Yeah. No, I totally agree. I think that was the right way to go. Even though there was a moment where it looks like he's pursuing what he thinks is going to be the miracle cure, it's no miracle cure. It does not work out for him at all and it's not what he... It doesn't work out well.

Jodi Beckstine (00:57:09):

Yeah, and it may be perfect for someone else. It wasn't necessarily just for him, it was just his experience they were speaking about and it was devastating to watch, just the look on his face because he's ready to go. It's going to work, this is great, my life's back on track, and then this-

Keith Casebonne (00:57:27):

And he's selling all he belongings to make it happen. I mean, he's making big, big changes to do this.

Jodi Beckstine (00:57:36):

Yes, and then you just see it not work for him and just the crushing devastation of it. So it was so heartbreaking.

Keith Casebonne (00:57:44):

Absolutely. Well, Riz Ahmed's performance as Ruben required him to learn American Sign Language, and I couldn't believe this, but drumming from scratch. How did his portrayal change your view of the character's journey and how important is that authentic casting and lived experience in telling these stories?

Jodi Beckstine (00:58:04):

Yeah, it's a good point. Both of us believe in authentic casting, because too often opportunities go to these big named actors that may or may not have a disability or the disability that the film is about, but I think the key to this is Ruben is new to the Deaf culture and Deaf community, and by taking this role, so is Riz. And so to learn these things just like the character, you get that awkwardness, you get that frustration, you get that lived experience. It feels real, even though Riz is a hearing person. And at the same time, they use Deaf actors to fill out the community. So I think that helped lend itself to lived experiences. You can't fake that, especially with the children. So I think he did a great job. And again, of course, I want more roles for Deaf actors and disabled actors, not just background, but I think for this particular case, it made sense because I think to watch someone make that leap from community to community was important, and I think they were able to achieve that.

Keith Casebonne (00:59:29):

Yeah. Yeah, I totally agree. And the actor that played Joe, Paul, I don't know if it's Rossi or Raci, R-A-C-I, he's not Deaf either, but he's a CODA, a child of Deaf adults, and so he has lived experience as well and in a way that I think makes him good for the role he's playing where he's sort of that intermediary in a way, which is probably a role he had a lot as a CODA. So I think, again, lived experience is part of the story. Another performance, not really on the subject specifically of disability and representation, but another character we haven't brought up yet, but it was really another one that I feel like after the movie, I thought more about how impactful the character was, is Lou. So Lou is Ruben's girlfriend and she is also really his savior in so many ways.

(01:00:34):

It's stated at some point that she saved him from addiction, from heroin addiction specifically, but she makes the big decision to essentially leave him, not breaking up, but to physically separate from him so that he will stay with Joe and the others in this Deaf community and learn and grow. Meanwhile, she kind of moves on with her life and they're reunited later, but again, it's in another way. She doesn't directly do something that helps heal him, but indirectly that meeting is sort of a reality check for Ruben, and it's part of where he starts understanding his place in this new world of his and realizes, yeah, I got to move on. And so it's like, again, her presence, that interaction, she saved him once again.

(01:01:48):

So really in a way, there's three different moments, away from heroin, to embrace the Deaf community, and then again, when he loses that connection with the Deaf community, tries the cochlear implant solution and doesn't really work out and he kind of just sees he's a negative influence on her and her own addictive behaviors, and makes that decision to move on. It's really, really powerful stuff. So there's a lot of really great acting and the storytelling is superb, the script writing is great. So yeah, just another character as part of the story that is crucial, we hadn't mentioned yet.

Jodi Beckstine (01:02:39):

Yeah. One key point about her without giving too much of the stories, she makes the decision that she knows he needs to get to be with this community, and she makes a decision to leave him behind, but she has nowhere to go, really. They're together. So she goes back to a toxic relationship and sacrifices that in order for him to do what he needs to do. So she puts herself in a very bad place. Her addictive personality and putting herself into a toxic situation for the betterment of him is so loving and giving. And yeah, you're right. She doesn't get enough credit necessarily for that. But yeah, three times a charm for him to be set on the right path and the path that he needs to be on. But what a good story. The Sound of Metal gives us more than a story. It's an invitation to see disability, community and change through a different lens. So whether you're into music or movies or just good storytelling, this film definitely has something to say.

Keith Casebonne (01:03:52):

Yeah, indeed. And if you haven't seen it yet, it's streaming now. It's out there. Please watch it. We'll link resources for the film on our show notes. And if you have watched it, let us know how it landed for you.

Jodi Beckstine (01:04:02):

Thanks for joining us this week on our Deep Cut. We'll keep sharing stories and keep learning and keep the conversation going.

(01:04:11):

That's a wrap on episode 100. We can't thank Lachi enough for joining us and sharing her vision for a more accessible, more vibrant future in music and beyond.

Keith Casebonne (01:04:20):

Indeed. And thank you to every guest, every listener, and also especially to Maddie for helping us build up this space over the years.

Jodi Beckstine (01:04:28):

And here's to a hundred more episodes and to always keeping disability at the center of the conversation. If you want to listen to Lachi's I'M THAT, I highly recommend it, but don't blame me when you can't get it out of your head.

Keith Casebonne (01:04:40):

And we'll have a link to purchase Lachi's upcoming book, I Identify as Blind, in the show notes. Thanks so much for listening, and we'll see you next time on Disability Deep Dive.

AUDIO (01:04:49):

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