

Rolling Stone

Downtown Boys: Meet America's Most Exciting Punk Band

This righteous Providence crew is playing insane shows that put politics front and center

BY DAVID GROSSMAN December 11, 2015



Downtown Boys put on riotously fun shows that combine radical activism with high-energy punk. Jen Cray

Victoria Ruiz and Joey DeFrancesco, lead singer and guitarist of the most exciting punk band in America today, Downtown Boys, are eating pizza before a show in their hometown of Providence and discussing the finer points of Internet policy. "We really need to connect on-the-ground policing with Internet surveillance and the criminalization of the Internet and think of it all as the police state, and state violence," Ruiz says as *The X-Files* plays on the TV overhead.

For those tired of living in a country where it's OK to give equal weight to #AllLivesMatter and to consider abortion a crime, where hourly workers are expected to be grateful for the scraps they get and never ask for more, and where xenophobia and gun culture have blurred together with patriotism, you've got two choices for public events: a Bernie Sanders rally or a Downtown Boys show, and Victoria Ruiz is a better public speaker. The Providence band's two LPs, a 2012 self-titled effort and this year's *Full Communism*, are galvanizing blasts, but seeing Downtown Boys live electrifies every nerve.

There are a few elements at play here: the abrasive horn section of Adrienne Berry and Emmett Fitzgerald, drummer Norlan Olivo's manic abilities, which often lead to his standing on his drum kit as the crowd lifts the two of them together. But chief among them are Ruiz's introductions to songs, which feel like Amy Goodman channelling X-Ray Spex' Poly Styrene, Ta-Nehisi Coates meeting Fugazi's Ian MacKaye. She talks about the slave trade, pointing out the markers and businesses that made up the transactional components of America's original sin, connects these corporations to modern-day landlords and the police, draws these institutions into whatever room they're playing, and then encourages their destruction through song. The crowd inevitably explodes into a physical manifestation of these anthems, slamming against each other in the type of solidarity where they know, they truly know, that in the fight against invisible and violent superstructures, they're the ones who will win.

An easy critique of ideologues is that they don't dirty their pure visions with details, facts and figures. Yet here are Ruiz and DeFrancesco, eating pizza, drawing a direct line from the late Aaron Swartz's work on the Stop Online Piracy Act of 2012 to their performances.

The three met in 2010, united by the failed run for Congress by Swartz's friend David Segal. Ruiz had just moved to Providence from California, intrigued by its arts scene and cheaper rent than New York, and had taken a job at the Renaissance Providence Hotel, where she met DeFrancesco. A full-fledged member of that scene, he was part of a radical brass band named after Providence's official motto, the What Cheer? Brigade. From there, he had also formed a band named after an early Springsteen lyric: "And them downtown boys sure talk gritty/It's so hard to be a saint in the city" ("It sounded tough and fun but also queer," he elaborates). Ruiz quickly joined the band, and when she heard about Segal's work for hotel workers, joined his Congressional campaign doing Spanish language outreach. She now works as a part-time organizer with the group Segal and Swartz founded together, Demand Progress.

Segal took a strong interest in Downtown Boys —DeFrancesco refers to him as the band's unofficial label. "I was thinking of new ideas how to harness the Internet into these organizing campaigns that Demand Progress was doing, how to take the energy he saw at our shows," DeFrancesco says, "to channel it into what he and Aaron had been working on for so many years. I pitched the idea a year ago of making a website focused on radical artists." That site, now known as *Spark Mag* (a Downtown Boys-affiliated DIY venue in Providence is named Spark City), boasts interviews with artists like Baltimore rapper Abdu Ali and Atlanta post-punk band Algiers as well as essays, like Priests' Katie Alice Greer on presenting as femme and Don Giovanni's Joe Steinhardt on Spotify economics.



Victoria Ruiz of Downtown Boys. Priests' Katie Alice Greer calls the band the "most naturally insane joyful angry thing." Josh Sisk

Those last two speak to the interconnectivity of punk these days. Greer initially signed Downtown Boys to Priests' label Sister Polygon — she says that seeing them for first the first time felt like the "most naturally insane joyful angry thing" — and the band is currently signed to Don Giovanni.

Ruiz ends the interview in the pizza shop because Lovesick, "the best band in Providence," is apparently halfway through their set, "and they only have, like, five songs." The band walks a few quick blocks to New Urban Arts, a community arts studio for high-school students. Various community members offer up their skills and abilities as mentors; the students decide how mentors can help their art. Most members of the current Downtown Boys lineup have spent time here, either as a mentor or volunteers. A sixth member recently left the band to work there full time. Art covers the walls, and teens and tweens in Nirvana shirts rock out accordingly as Lovesick plays punk with metal riffs. A guy in a shark costume hops around and gleefully jumps into the pit. Lovesick throws T-shirts into the crowd like they're at an NBA game, Ruiz runs around trying to catch one.

There are a few bands on before Downtown Boys headline, so everybody piles into Norlan's 2003 Hyundai Sonata to talk about that subject as old as time, the State of Punk. "It's white," Olivo, a founding member with DeFrancesco, says with a sigh. The band has been through this conversation before. "One thing I think about a lot is, why is it white? People think that people of color aren't interested in punk music, aren't interested in the arts. I don't think 'interested' is the right word; I think they're just not thinking about it. Those resources, those facilities where they could do those things aren't as available to them. So it's interesting being a band with people of color in it and moving into these traditionally white spaces ... I feel better going to those places and confronting those people with music, and being there. That in itself is very political, very radical. I feel like we're challenging them."

"It's really amazing to go into a room of white dudes," adds saxophonist Berry. "We kill, slash and thrash." At this point, though, the band rarely gets all-white crowds. "People of color come out," says Victoria.

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Adrienne Berry

Providence has a proud musical tradition of abrasiveness, going back over a decade with noise bands like Lightning Bolt and Black Dice. "We take the loud, noisy aspect from Providence and bring it to our band in a punk, pop, controlled way," Norlan says. As they begin their set at New Urban Arts, they quickly show how they're able to not only control that noise but also use it to galvanize anyone looking to destroy what's outside those walls.

Ruiz begins to pick up steam as the music starts, defining New Urban Arts as a template for the future, a place where canon and tradition only matter as much as they can serve the next generation. How the physical energy in this room can be redefined on the Internet, how the kids of color, the queer kids, anyone here hassled by the cops can take that energy and redefine their future. "Coming in on a wave!" she and Joey yell at the start of their first song. "On a wave of history!"