

Punk For All

Downtown Boys bring the thunder with a charged up message to meet the needs of the times

Posted January 20, 2016



Downtown Boys deliver punk in its most relevant form to Providence and beyond

PHOTO BY TIM SIEKIERA

Tony Pacitti

2015 was a hell of a year for Downtown Boys, Providence's own "bi bilingual political dance sax punk party." Their album, *Full Communism*, dropped in May and got them the attention of *Rolling Stone*, *NME*, *Pitchfork*, *Stereogum*, NPR and *Spin*. Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello called them America's best punk band. Local media, present company included, was generally late to the party in that respect. I can't speak for my peers, but I've got no good excuse. All I can do is try to make it right because, in a world where racial inequalities are dominating headlines, Downtown Boys is the kind of punk we need.

On *Full Communism* the band leads a six-person assault against all the world's phobias and -isms. Lead singer Victoria Ruiz alternates between English and Spanish as she spits righteous fire across 12 tracks that manage to make the saxophone work wonders for aggressively political punk rock. Not-ready-for-radio topics like the lingering effects of slavery, white supremacy and queerphobia are given the gloves-

off treatment. Even the institution of punk, which prides itself on being inherently progressive, is challenged.

“What isn’t being brought to the light but is happening in underground spaces are a lot of POC punks and queer musicians,” explains Victoria. “People who are breaking out of cis (cisgender), white male identity who are making art and music in order to fight that status quo. That’s punk.”

She chalks up the idea of punk being a white man’s game to the same skewed perceptions that make politicians, CEOs and cops, by and large, white. “Why is punk so white? That question comes from what we see being raised in punk, or what’s put on magazine covers. It’s institutions of whiteness,” says Victoria.

“Maybe the problem isn’t with punk, but with how we’re reading history and how we’re analyzing it.”

“There’s always this stigma that people of color aren’t doing art or aren’t in punk bands because they’re not interested in those types of things,” says drummer Norlan Olivo, who cites his experiences at AS220 and New Urban Arts as the reason he’s a drummer and currently in school for photography. “It’s not that they aren’t interested, it’s that there aren’t a lot of resources where they can go and do those things in the community that they live in.”

Norlan and Victoria have served as mentors at New Urban Arts and praise both organizations for the roles they play in providing these resources. By opening those doors, another wave of punks, regardless of their medium, will be better equipped to tear down walls that would otherwise hold them back, which is about as punk as it gets.

“When I go to see bands that I like a lot and see what they can do in their space, that in turn inspires me to try to create something so that people can come to our shows and feel included and empowered,” says lead guitarist Joey DeFrancesco. “I want them to feel powerful enough to create possibilities that they’re not seeing.”

Speaking of creating possibilities, Joey and Victoria, along with Rhode Island politician and activist David Segal, launched the website Spark Mag in November. The three of them saw a problem with the way local bands with a political message were being covered – or weren’t being covered, in many cases – and took it upon themselves to create an alternative space for alternative voices. Described as the “culture wing of Demand Progress,” Spark Mag serves to raise awareness and financial support for musicians and artists whose work promotes progressive ideas.

Downtown Boys don’t have time for superficial outrage or trendy slacktivism. Theirs is punk in its purest form: angry, marginalized and ferociously hopeful for a better tomorrow, someday. Last year there were a lot of ears on them and, for their part, they’re keeping the conversation moving forward. This year, they’re set to tour down to SXSW, then over to Europe later in the spring. Each show is a conversation, an opportunity to open one more person up to what’s happening in the world around them and the idea

that it's within their capacity to do something about it.

“The most important thing,” Victoria says, “is for people to feel included and empowered.”

Downtown Boys

downtownboys.bandcamp.com

thesparkmag.com