

SURRENDER

TO THE FLOW



GO SEE ROCKING FOR INCLUSION!

This Band, Made Up of Incredibly Talented Musicians with Autism, Is Taking New Jersey by Storm

By Cory Murphy; Bloomfield, NJ

When the lights go down and the first chord strikes at an RFI show, the barrier between stage and audience disappears — there is only the sound. Talking with co-founders Andrés Ortiz and Kevin March (drummer for Guided by Voices), it became clear that Rocking for Inclusion isn't just a gig; it's a celebration of pure, unfiltered joy. This band proves that talent knows no boundaries. Having spent nearly 9 years with School of Rock in Montclair, NJ, I watched this dream come to life firsthand.

CM: If you were to describe Rocking for Inclusion, how would you?

AO: It's a band made of incredibly talented musicians with autism.

CM: Who else is in the band with you?

AO: There are friends like Rosie, Jake, Jasmine, Anthony, Ezra, Sam, and Rob. We get along very well, and we have been playing, not together, for over ten years. When we first got together to play, it was perfect right from the beginning.

CM: When this came to fruition, what was that a-ha moment, not just that it would be cool, but that moment where you knew this needed to happen?

AO: It's been a long-time dream of mine for many years. My parents and Kevin knew how great of an idea it was.

KM: I've been working with Andrés for over 10 years, and I would say

he might have mentioned it back then as wanting to have a band that he could play in and could potentially do shows. That was, like, some of the All-Stars that tour for School of Rock, but not unlike a band like Phish or a band like, I'm in, Guided by Voices, that go out there and perform in front of an audience that is just excited to see them. I remember him talking to me about it. And I was, like, well, that's possible. Um, let's see what we can do. And then, over time, the more he talked about it, the more I realized his dream of doing this needs to come true, and working with his parents,



Kevin March & Andrés Ortiz

and there's neurotypical, brought together as well. So, I would say Andrés's dream has come true. And now, it's in a place where all the possibilities, we entered uncharted territory for Rocking for Inclusion.

CM: I love it. Uncharted water is good water to be in sometimes. What kind of music do you play? Do you have any favorite songs of the band?

AO: There's a lot to name; there are a lot of crowd pleasers. Like *Don't Stop Believing*, *Love My Friends*, *Somebody to Love*, not the Queen version, Jefferson Airplane. *Sweet Home Alabama*, *L-O-V-E* by Nat King Cole, and Amy Winehouse songs, like *Valerie* and *Rehab*. But when Jasmine sings Amy Winehouse in particular, it's like it sounds like that Amy Winehouse is

alive again. And when Rosie sings *Somebody to Love*, for instance, and Jefferson Airplane song, is also like spot on. **KM:** And Andrés, you do an incredible Ringo Starr

AO: Oh, thank you! I appreciate that, but Lewis (his vocal instructor), says I sing it in my own style, and that's better anyway.

KM: Yeah, I think the way you do it is inspiring.

CM: Since you have started RFI, have you seen any shifts in perceptions about people with autism? (See RFI Con'd on Page 49)



Top Row: Rob (music director), Rosie, Ezra, Sam, **Bottom:** Anthony, Jasmine, Andrés, Jake, **Photo Credit:** Ken Riccio

Not Pictured: Melissa — Andrés's sweetheart and band mascot, Sammy — Fan Club President, Andrés' and Jake's Mom — Social Media

about two years ago, I think we had enough participants that were here at the school to form the band. And once I told Andrés we had that, the excitement built, we can do this, so we started doing it on one level, took a break, and then brought it back. Once we found somebody that could help us run the rehearsals because they now rehearse weekly, like a real, you know, like any band, any band rehearses.



Nicka, was a cannabis seller. In 2010, his entire operation fell to the authorities. Matt refused to plea by throwing anyone else under the bus and ended up with a 15-year sentence + five year additional on a bracelet upon release.

It took me a few years to learn he had been caught, then it took further years to track his location through the federal penitentiary system. We had been back in touch for a couple years when I was introduced to LPP. Though Matt will say, in many ways prison saved his life, I can attest that incarcerated Matt was a different man than Phish tour Matt. As he's told me, you enter prison non-violent but quickly learn that violence is the currency inside and at times the only way you're making it home.

When I brought Matt to LPP's attention, he had been fighting on his own for years to be released. LPP was able to give me key information that his lawyers used to earn him compassionate release in March of 2023, five years earlier than his sentence end of 2028. Matt was also given a release grant which helped him afford a trauma therapist who has been key in repairing some of the institutionalized harm to his psyche. We were able to get Matt involved with a LPP adjacent program called the Cannabis Justice Initiative, and he was granted clemency along with 8 other LPP constituents by Joe Biden in December 2024. Matt asked me to note that in the video where he cuts off his ankle bracelet, he looks directly at the camera and says, "Thank you to Erin Cadigan for letting me know I was worth it."

That's the thing about Last Prisoner Project, they believe every cannabis prisoner is worth it – they are.

(RFI Con'd from Page 40)

AO: We want to prove that people with autism can perform with excitement and talent and the people will love us from the beginning. When they come they think we'll be an ok band but once we start rocking out, they can't tell if we have autism or not.

KM: It's a celebration of who you are and as individuals and the importance of people seeing you for who you are. The audience I saw at Asbury Park watching them, I could tell, wow, they are who they are and where we can be in the audience, connecting with that as well. It's full-on acceptance of whoever you are, I think, is what they present as a show.

AO: Absolutely! A lot of the people in that audience at the Stone Pony both had autism and didn't have autism. We had sold out those shows, and we had a variety of people there,

and they went crazy, and they went wild over us - totally unforgettable.

CM: What would you say was one of the post rewarding moments for you?

AO: Okay, when we played the WAE center (which is a center for the developmentally disabled), there was a special young lady with special needs who asked Jasmine and I for autographs. We both said, yes, but for me, I not only signed an autograph, I signed one of my drumsticks, and I gave it to her. And then I offered her the big opportunity to stand behind the drum kit, and she accepted. And she was not shy of it and that made me feel happy when I saw that and she, also, asked Jasmine for advice about singing, and so Jasmine help with that.

CM: You've officially hit your first rock star moment, Andrés.

KM: The WAE center event, it was literally just pure joy in that room. The smiles on their faces, the people that were with them, just watching this, and the interaction was incredible, and then they were asked to play the center's prom, so they did that as well. And the same thing happened. People were dancing that might just normally just be sitting in a chair. They got up and they were dancing. So pure joy.

CM: Is there a moment that occurred with you or another member of RFI that really sticks with you?

AO: When I first proposed the idea, I did that on my sweetheart's and parent's wedding anniversary, Sept. 12, and I told Kevin and he said yes right from the beginning, and I couldn't believe that I was so happy to hear that.

KM: When Andrés would talk to me, one thing I believe in, the potential in something and seeing that. And the more he spoke about it, the more I saw the dream as he put it, I could see the potential in what it could become and beyond. And with the support of more musicians around us, it's coming to fruition, and it's like I said, it's going beyond that at this point and the commitment from all the musicians is 100% there. To give them that platform, that stage, that some people look at is only for certain levels of musicians. It's not about that. It's about the potential of people and the potential of an audience coming together in a live setting moment. I think that's what RFI is, including everybody in that. It's about music, and the sound of music and how it affects you as a collective, and that potential is brought out in all our lessons every week with Andrés.

CM: I love that, and I remember Andrés talking about this even when I first started working at the school.

KM: I don't know if you remember this, you probably do. We got asked to play at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park. He came in and was asking about it. I was, like, "We just got asked to do it!" "And to see his eyes light up. He couldn't believe what was being told to him, and you bring that joy. That's what we get to receive from being around this."

CM: For someone reading this, what is one thing you'd like them to know about RFI?

AO: We are a band and have autism is one thing and two, We want to share this everywhere and I, or we do mean everywhere. But like the song says - someday, some way we will. And we're looking forward to doing those opportunities. *Someday Some Way* is one of our original songs. That's another thing that makes RFI unique, we do covers and originals.

KM: I was writing, and I was inspired by Andrés and the other musicians I work with, like Sam, he writes a song called *Acceptance of Diversity, Life in the Universe, You Can't Catch Me*, he writes. It is a band. There's nothing to stop this band from being the next biggest band in the world. Yeah, I think that's our dream now.

AO: Yeah, no one can stop us, or nothing can stop us.

KM: He was mentioning *Someday, Some Way*, it just kind of turned into, if you think it, if you believe it, if you manifest it, it will happen, and that's what Rocking for Inclusion was. Andrés made sure to never give up on that, and that's why it came to fruition.

Rocking For Inclusion is a 501c3, for more information or to donate, please see the link below or scan:



<https://rockingforinclusion.org/>

IG: rockingforinclusion