Everyday Climate Champions Transcript

Episode 11: Music as a Voice for Climate Action

Sean Mendelson: Hi everyone. Thank you for joining me, Sean Mendelson, your host this episode of Everyday Climate Champions. Today's topic: **Music as a Voice for Change**. In the fall of 2021, when I was trained to become a Climate Reality Leader by Al Gore's Climate Reality Project, there was a lot of time spent on the science of climate change.

It was fact after fact that we were meant to retain and share with others. As a creative artist who wanted to be part of the solution to climate change, I was overwhelmed. Then, at the very end of the training, one of the scientists said, "We need art more than ever in the climate movement. It helps create a bold emotional impact that sometimes the facts can't provide." I took this to heart.

Today we are talking with Pete Kronowitt, a climate activist and performing songwriter in San Francisco. He has five professionally produced albums to his credit. Pete founded Face The Music Collective, a guide for creative artists utilizing performances to inspire individual action. Pete is also on the board of Music Declares Emergency, a music industry organization focused on climate change.

He has a brand new song and hopes to bring together 100,000 kids to sing on the chorus. The idea is that these kids will pledge to partner with a climate group that promotes a call to action.

We acknowledge the indigenous people of the land we interview him from in San Francisco, the ancestral home of the Ohlone, Ramaytush and Muwekma people. Thanks for joining me as our guest today, Pete.

Pete Kronowitt: It's a pleasure to be here.

Sean Mendelson: As a songwriter, was there a moment when you realized your ideas could convince people to make change?

Pete Kronowitt: I realized that it wasn't really the song that was causing change. It may change an individual to think about something, but you needed some other catalyst, and that was where it led me to creating Face the Music.

Sean Mendelson: Can you tell me how that works and, and some of your accomplishments?

Pete Kronowitt: Sure. The Face the Music Collective, it's a loose collective. There's probably about 80 social justice artists now that I talked to and encourage them to use a very core idea. We partner with an organization, and usually bring people together in a show, in a physical space, and then use that opportunity to guide those people to take an action that has an impact. These shows, they were really testing out ways that we can get people engaged. For example, we've put a big QR code, we printed it out on a five by five board, and then had people go to a website to take specific actions that we thought would have an impact on climate change.

Sean Mendelson: You have another group, which is called Music Declares Emergency Us. Can you talk about some of the big music artists that you've committed to that group?

Pete Kronowitt: Music Declares Emergency was founded in the UK in 2019. They came up with a really great slogan, "No Music on a Dead Planet." They would recruit artists to make a declaration that they were gonna get involved and do something about climate change.

Really prominent artists have signed the declaration. Artists like Billie Eilish, Bon Iver, Annie Lennox, Arcade Fire, Bootsy Collins, The Pretenders, Billy Bragg and Tom Morello. And what we're doing is we're developing specific programs to activate the artists and the fans. As you said, using the creative process can connect people in different ways. There's something about art that builds community.

Sean Mendelson: That's really a beautiful commitment and it's awesome that you have all these big name artists. Now let's listen to a song you co-wrote called "If We Try."

[song excerpt from "If We Try"]

We were just listening to an excerpt of, "If We Try," a song you co-wrote. It's a heartfelt kind of deeper song in the face of climate change. But the chorus is optimistic. Can you talk about how this song came together?

Pete Kronowitt: Absolutely. So early on in working with Music Declares Emergency. I was asked by one of the group leaders to go talk to the Climate Music Project. And we came up with an idea of doing a songwriting workshop

where we get singer-songwriters to develop a song. The idea was that songs could be serious, but they also would express some hope. The Climate Music Project creates music that's based in what's really happening by bringing climate scientists into the mix. So it was climate scientists and the songwriters that got together.

The songwriter that I was teamed up with for "If We Try," is a guy named Jose Mrochek, and he's a Bolivian singer songwriter. He's very popular in Bolivia with a rock band called Avionica. Jose came up with the bulk of the song. But there might be a way to encourage hope into it and you know, like that question, *if we try*. And so that was my major contribution to the song.

It was produced by a guy named Sebastian Chris. He's a major influence in the music industry. I'm just some guy with a guitar. You know, like the fact that I co-wrote a song that was produced by… this guy won like almost 20 Grammys! It's crazy.

Sean Mendelson: Yeah, it's a really cool song and I think the listeners definitely will want to hear it!

Let's listen to a bit of another one of your other songs, Pete. It's called "Roly Poly" and we'll talk about it on the other side.

[song excerpt from "Roly Poly"]

While listening to your climate activist song, "Roly Poly," I noticed the refrain: "Rising tides, they sink our shores. Bumblebees won't buzz no more. Butterflies won't have a place to rest. Sink, or swim, will we still care? Will the roly polies still be there if we say we've done our very best?" How did you arrive at this lyric and what has been the response to this song?

Pete Kronowitt: That lyric was co-written by two phenomenal songwriters, Mimi Hearn and Christine Harbach. Mimi gets all the credit for that chorus. I came up with the idea around the roly poly, but Mimi just killed it with that chorus. I just knew that there was a way to craft the phrasing more effectively. And now when I play it, people do respond. Like, the melody is so positive, where the words are not.

Sean Mendelson: Yes. Well that's excellent juxtaposition. Something that's pop-sounding or accessible or happy, and then they realize, oh, 'I'm also stating some deeper message here'. You've pulled off a good trick.

I found you because you're working on this new song called "I Wanna Be Cool". Can you talk about the song you intend to release at the end of 2023? It's a great playful song and using the word *cool* as double entendre for, of course, combating the global *warming*, is a simple and brilliant idea. What are your plans for the song?

Pete Kronowitt: Two of the songwriters I recruited to come to the songwriting workshop, one, Will Kimbrough... He released an album called *Americanitis* that just kind of drew me into his work. And Will kind of was the instigator of the idea of "I Wanna be Cool." And the other person who I invited was Brant Miller. Brant is an award-winning Nashville-based songwriter.

And they co-wrote this brilliant pop song, you know, one part Americana, another part maybe, Beatles-influenced. And during the bridge of the song is this, "Can't you hear your kids starting to shout?" That was the genesis.

[excerpt from song "I Wanna Be Cool"]

So, a while ago I was reading this quote by a songwriter and organizer named Joe Hill. He said, "A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over."

And that's the spirit of this. The chorus of the song is, "I wanna be cool. How about you? Together, there's not one single thing that we couldn't do." It's such a beautiful sentiment and I think saying that gives you the authority for the personal investment that you can do something together with other people. And, and I just love that. I love that line in the song. I love the meter of it. I love the phrasing. Yeah. And it's just really powerful. And I think Joe Hill's quote is the perfect partner for that song.

Sean Mendelson: I think so, too. And let's listen to a little bit of that song right now and its infant stages.

[excerpt from song "I Wanna Be Cool”]

Pete Kronowitt: It occurred to us that if we started getting a lot of kids onto the recording, that might be an opportunity to not just get the kids to sing on the recording, but to really internalize the issue around what's happening in the climate, and then to direct them to take very specific actions. So we have three things that we're gonna do.

There's a great nonprofit called Rewiring America, and they created this tool that they call the IRA calculator. The Inflation Reduction Act. It's a really simple thing where you just go into their website and you put in your zip code, your income, whether you own your home or not, and then it produces a list of tax incentives or rebates you can get when you do things that could affect the climate.

Sean Mendelson: And Pete, what's the second thing that people can do in respect to this campaign?

Pete Kronowitt: So the second thing we're recommending is that they at least *get involved* with influencing politicians who will put legislation in place for addressing climate change. We are gonna partner with organizations to target high schools and older kids.

Some kids obviously are not old enough to vote. Greta's a great example. As she was younger she spoke out and that's what kids need to do.

And the third, more education about climate. We have a couple of partners that we're working with that will provide climate education in different kinds of forms and will direct schools and other groups to utilize the curriculum.

Sean Mendelson: Can you tell the listeners how you're specifically gonna integrate children in this project? How you plan to fuse all of this together?

Pete Kronowitt: We're working with schools and there's gonna be a possible video element, so kids need to ask their parents to sign a consent form. That's where we got 'em. So when the parents sign the consent form, we're gonna have a link. We're gonna ask the choir director or the group leader for the song to assign a *champion* to do certain projects, whether it's greening the school, putting climate change curriculum in place for different classes, like, to really be dedicated.

And we're looking for a couple of things. We're looking for partners that can help us build programs. If you are listening to this, go to our website. It's really simple: Climatemusic.org/becool and join us, ‘cause we need the help to do the outreach to schools.

Secondly, If you have a relationship with a potential call to action partner, then, you know, we also wanna hear from you.

Sean Mendelson: Excellent. Thank you, Pete, for being our guest today. We've got a lot of great information, ideas for listeners. You're really showing us how each person can play a key role in bringing climate solutions to life.

Pete Kronowitt: Hey Sean, thanks so much for having me on the show. This has been an absolute pleasure. I'm really excited about the podcast that you're doing and I hope people get involved with the Be Cool Campaign.

Sean Mendelson: . Hey listeners, want more information? Look below this episode's description to find links to all of the resources Pete mentioned, including ways you can get involved. If you're looking for a transcript of this episode, it's also waiting for you right there.

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