



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

S3E8: AN ARTIST'S RESPONSE TO CONFLICT WITH RENÉ MARIE

René Marie: An artist can't just put your creativity out there and tell the public just deal with it. I don't think that's right. I think if we are going to be creative in ways that do disturb, then we have to face the results of that. It's not courageous, it's not fearless, if you just do it and walk away.

Sam Fuqua: That's René Marie, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we talk with René Marie about an artist's response to conflict. She is a songwriter and singer. She's recorded almost a dozen albums, including *Sound of Red*, which was nominated for a 2016 Grammy Award in the Best Jazz Vocal Album category.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we are so happy to be joined for this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! by René Marie. Welcome.

René Marie: Thank you very much. I'm so happy to be here.

Sam Fuqua: I wanted to start with just asking you about how you started your singing career because you started later than most people. You were in your forties, right?

René Marie: I was in my forties when I started getting paid to sing.

Sam Fuqua: Okay.

René Marie: I'll put it like that.

Sam Fuqua: In terms of taking that leap to...

René Marie: Mm-hmm...

Sam Fuqua: ...being a professional singer, was there any internal conflict that you had to deal with?

René Marie: No, there wasn't any conflict. There was a lot of ignorance. And I didn't know what I was doing. In fact, I didn't have a plan. I just started singing because one day my son heard, uh, uh, a singer singing the songs that I would sing at home. She was on stage with a band and he thought I could do a better job, and he talked me into, uh, starting to sing in public. My husband, uh, also thought it was a good idea, so I just like on a whim, just, was no forethought, there was no plan, there was no, nothing like that. It was just, "La-la-la-la-la I think I'm gonna sing." Kinda like that. Really. And the more I got into it, the more I realized that this was a form of communication I had kinda let go by the wayside. It was another language actually, that I could communicate with much better than any other way of communicating that I have. So,

that was
how it

happened. And then people would ask me, "Well, what's your five-year plan?" And, which point I would laugh, not in their face, but I would laugh because I was like, I don't even have a five-day plan.

I don't know what you're talking about. And it turns out I'm a person who makes decisions by how I feel about things inside rather than having this plan written out on a piece of paper. You know what I mean, Sam?

Sam Fuqua: I do. I, I think sometimes that works for me. Other times I wish I had a plan.

René Marie: Mm-hmm. I found that by not having a plan, I was stepping into all these big puddles of joy, you know. Not having the plan allowed me to look at a doorway or a path and go, mmm, no, I don't think I'm gonna do that. Even if it might have been the conventional route to go to get where I ended up coming, but I just didn't wanna go that route. It didn't feel right. Or sometimes it would be like the only obvious choice. Like the universe was pointing, like, do this, do this, do this.

Sam Fuqua: Did you run into any conflict with people in the, the business side of the music business who wished you had a plan?

René Marie: All the time. All the time. It's still that way. I just don't do it according to plan. I ran into conflict with my, my husband because he at first said it was okay for me to sing, and then he said, "No, I'm, changed my mind. You can't sing." So, there was a back and forth over a period of two years of conflict, and some of it was, um, very, what's the word I'm trying to think of? It was intense. I'll put it that way.

Sam Fuqua: Like abusive intense or?

René Marie: There was plenty of verbal, verbal abuse and it ended the last day of our being together, uh, ended in physical a, abuse because I was supposed to go to the studio the following day to record my very first CD and he told me that I could not go, and if I did go and came back home, that I would, could expect to experience some physical abuse. And, I thought for a few seconds, and then I picked up my music and stuff and tried to leave, but, um, I will, he prevented me from leaving. Um, and then when it was all over, I picked up my stuff again and um, and walked out the door. My music, and a few of my clothes and, and we started recording the next day. Now, if somebody had asked me three months prior to that, "Hey, uh, do you think you would ever leave your husband and leave your home for music?" I would've said, "No, of course not." But, it wasn't so much the music that I was leaving home for. It was having been given an ultimatum, like, if you do this, you come back, I'm gonna do that. Or, you just try it and see what happens. It was that type of thing. And I thought, I don't wanna live with anybody, parents, sibling, child, husband, who thinks it's okay to give ultimatums like that. Who, who wants to live like that? Not me. Even if it meant somebody said, well, if you leave, you'll never be able to sing again. Okay, fine. Because I'm not gonna live like this.

Alexis Miles: Did you always have that strength of conviction and, and I'm wondering if growing up in Jim Crow Virginia for your first ten years...

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René

Marie:

Mm-hmm...

Alexis Miles: ...has anything to do with that?

René Marie: I think I've always had a very strong sense of justice and of what's right and what's wrong, what's unfair. I've always had that. And not just as it applied to me, but to other people, and I would often come to the defense of people who were too shy or some other reason why they wouldn't stand up for themselves. And I would stand up for them, you know. I would get into fights, not because somebody was picking on me, but because they were picking on a friend of mine or a handicapped kid or, you know, and, uh, I would use my words and if that didn't work, then I would use whatever else was at my disposal, including a pocketbook in the fourth grade. I remember using that as a weapon.

Alexis Miles: René, I noticed that you, you talk a lot about honesty and truth and inner guidance. And I wanna talk a little bit about 2008 and how those qualities came into play. And so, of course, I'm referring to your invi, invitation to sing...

René Marie: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: ...um, at an event where the mayor was scheduled to speak, and I think you were asked to sing the *Star Spangled Banner*, and you, you use the, the melody, but you substituted the lyrics. So, you used the lyrics of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, also known as the Black or the Negro National Anthem, to the tune of the *Star Spangled Banner*. There was a lot of fallout from that. So, could you...

René Marie: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: ...talk about that as it relates to those qualities you often speak of, you know, truth, justice, joy, guidance.

René Marie: I had written a suite called *Voice of My Beautiful Country*, and in that suite, the third movement of it, it was the song you just described. The melody to the national anthem, but the lyrics from *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. And I had decided that I would no longer sing either one of those songs the conventional way. Like, I would no longer sing *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by its original melody. And the same with the national anthem.

*Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty.*

And, a few months prior to singing at the Mayor's State of the City Address, I sang at the Governor's Breakfast, and all I brought was a djembe and I sang a couple of songs and one of them was that third movement. And at the end of the event, someone from the, the mayor's office came up to me with a

business
card and

said, "We would like for you to sing at the Mayor's State of the City Address." So, since I had just sung the song that he heard, and then they asked me to sing it, to sing at the State of the City, I was thinking, okay, they know what this is all about. I'm, I'm happy to do it. But as the date got closer, I started feeling some fear, and you know, me and fear, we have a unusual relationship because I embrace the fear. I don't try to get rid of the fear or calm the fear. I feel all this energy, you know, fear is this, but it doesn't always have to go the way fear wants you to go. You can take that same energy and do some amazing things, and that was what I decided to do, was to take the fear, and I, I had a long conversation

with, um, Vincent Harding. Oh, that was so helpful. He said, "Don't shrink back! Don't shrink back! Move forward. Even if you fall, fall forward." You know?

So, I was nervous about it because I didn't know how it was gonna go. I wasn't trying to, um, make a point or anything like that. It just was my personal truth that black people had never been included in anything as it relates to what represents this country. Never. We always had to fight, struggle, protest, die, in order to get our voices heard. And I wanted to sing a song that reflected what we have been through. There were five or six religious representations on that days, and each one said their own prayer. I noted that and I was like, okay, yeah, this is right. I'm, I'm, yeah, I'm, I'm doing the right thing. So, um, it was very important to me to stay true to what I had originally decided well before there was an audience in front of me, or the mayor was standing there and there were, you know what I mean? There was, the color guard was there. Those things had to disappear for me and may stick true to myself because if I had done anything else, it would've been to try to get someone's approval, and, and I don't want my art to ever be based on that, whose approval I can get.

Alexis Miles: Part of that story that is fascinating to me is the fact that you got a lot of emails.

René Marie: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: And a lot of it quite hateful.

René Marie: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: And you made a decision to respond to every email that you got, even though it took you a long time to do.

René Marie: Yeah.

Alexis Miles: Could you talk about what made you make that decision?

René Marie: This all happened in one day. We did the thing in the morning. Someone on City Council, Charlie Brown, went to his office afterwards, he was fuming and he said, "What is this song that she sang?" And the reason I know this is because one of the interns in his office told us what happened. And so, she told him it's called the Black National Anthem. He took those two words, black national, and he called the conservative radio station. And of course, he goes down there, they call me. It was around 1:00 PM by this

time.

They

called me and asked me if I'm gonna, if I would like to come down there and talk, and I said, "Who is this? And what do you, I don't get it." Then they told me, well, we heard you did this, this, and this, and we'd like for you to come down and express your viewpoint. And I thought, no, you're not asking me to come down to express my viewpoint. What you wanna do is attack me. I didn't say that, but I knew that. And I said, "No, I don't think so." So, the mayor called me and said, "Hey, we are getting bombarded with emails and phone calls regarding what you did." Now he says, "I don't have any problem with it, but we can't get our work done because of all these phone calls." And I, right away I said, "Well, you're not responsible for what I did. So whoever calls, give them my phone number and if they email, here's my email address, because I'm responsible for, for answering to what any questions they may have about what I did." And that's, that's how it came about. I didn't think it would be, um, you know, something that big of

a deal. But girl, you know, you take these, um, highly revered emblems of what people want to believe America is and just throw a little bit of question at it. People, um, will sh, will really show who they are.

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun

Let us march on till victory is won

Yes Lord, is won.

And so, yeah, I, I, I decided an artist can't just put, you can't just put your creativity out there and tell the public just deal with it. I don't think that's right. I think if we are going to be creative in ways that do disturb, then we have to face the results of that. It's not courageous, it's not fearless, if you just do it and walk away, and let someone else handle the stuff that you deliberately stirred up. It's not fair. I don't think it's right. So, I wanted to, I wanted to, um, show responsibility and accountability. I know I have accountability. I decided to write a song about adultery, and go into great detail in the song, then I have to be willing to deal with it after the song is over, concert's over, and somebody's looking in my face and they're, they've been stirred up because of their own involvement in, in one way or another. You did what I'm saying? That's my opinion, and I wanted to face the music, so to speak. I wanted people to tell me their honest feelings and some of it was quite painful. Some of it was extremely puzzling. And some of the people were just calling to see if I would answer the phone.

I had one of the best conversations with an elderly white man who dialed my number, I answered, and he was stumbling all over himself at first, "Well, is this, uh, is this René?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I didn't think you were gonna answer." And, and, uh, we ha, we must have talked 20 minutes. He told me he was in the service. These were the conversations that really opened my eyes and then my heart, because I thought, René, you, you have really touched something here. I didn't quite know what it was, but I knew I couldn't turn away from it or run from it, or say somebody else answer them, or just use a stock answer. I tried to direct my responses exactly to what they were saying. I tried not to try to come across like I'm right in having done this. You're wrong. You're, got small minded. I, I didn't wanna have that viewpoint. I wanted to be able to say, we all have our own way of looking at things. I just happened to be an artist and this was how I wanted to express what had happened to me and other people of color, and how we have never had any say so in the representation of American ideals. We've never, so this is just one little song, you know. It's not trying to change the world. I just wanted to express this one thing. You know, in talking about it, I can feel the tension in my body because it was, it was a woo, unexpected and very intense.

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Alexis

Miles: If I

remember correctly, even Barack Obama weighed in on it when he was running for...

René Marie: Didn't he though?

Alexis Miles: ...the presidency.

René Marie: He sure did. They did not ask, uh, John McCain, they didn't ask him. They only asked Obama, which I thought, I'm like, what? Why you ask Obama? Why can't you ask McCain too? Well, we know the reason why. And, and it just hurt my feelings, what Obama said, but I understood. I understood. Do you remember what he said?

Alexis Miles: He, if I remember correctly, he said, if they asked you to sing a song, you should have sang that song, or something like that.

René Marie: Yep, that's what he said? Yeah. Like, oh man.

Alexis Miles: René, part of the irony about that for me is the beauty of the lyrics of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.

René Marie: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: Till earth and heaven ring.

René Marie: Mm-hmm.

Alexis Miles: It's a, the lyrics are beautiful and profound.

René Marie: They are. They're profound. But the context was a black woman singing a song written by another black person. And the, like you said, the lyrics are beautiful. A, another thing I got in many of the emails was this perspective, "Hey, you were hired to sing a song and you should not have changed the song you were gonna sing." And I always would ask them, "What if I had, instead of singing *Lift every Voice*, I had sung *America the Beautiful*? Then would you have been upset?" And of course, the answer will, "Well, no." So then, it's not the fact that I changed the song, it's just that I actually sang the lyrics to a different song. And why does that bother you? So, I would try to use, you know, searching questions to get them to maybe look at it a different way, if possible.

Alexis Miles: Were there some moments of transformation for the person you were talking to, um, or for yourself? You mentioned one when you were talking to the older white gentleman.

René

Marie:

There were some who calmed down, uh, as a result of, of me answering their questions. And they, their response was, "Oh, I didn't think about that." Or, "Oh, I didn't know that." "Oh, okay." Uh, but none that I could, I could actually point to and say this changed someone. It was just those types of remarks. But here's the one, the one response, it was a email that hurt me to my core. It was sent by a young black man. He said, "Why do you old black people always have to go back to the past? This is 2008," he said. I was just shocked beyond. At first, I was like old, who are you calling old? But that phrase, "old black people," you know, it brought up this imagery of me singing spirituals out in the field, when he said that. Uh, really it did, and I was hurt by that. And I know why he said it, because Obama was running for office and it did seem like, for some people, it seemed like, oh, we finally got over that hill. We got this behind us. We don't have to worry about this anymore. And some of the rest of us were, you know, fanning and going, mmm, I don't know about that, you know. And, I think that's what he was referring to. You know, we gotta keep stirring the pot. Why don't you just, you old black people, ooh, that hurt me. Um, and then there were some, uh, emails I got that were very to the, short and to the point that said, "Your itinerary is on your website. I know exactly where you're gonna be at such and such a time. Do you know how easy it would be to just shoot you?" And that caused me to have a meeting with my band, and I said, "Look, y'all. We are living in some difficult times. Here's what someone wrote, and it's not just one threat. I've gotten several of these. Um, I'm willing, I wrote the song so I'm willing to get up there and sing it regardless of

what happens, but I can't ask you to do it." And two, all three of them said, "Oh no, we are with you. We are with you 100 percent." And so before, if, if I put that song on our, uh, set list, before getting up on the stage, I would be like, okay, this could be the night. I don't know. But I would rather, I would rather go down singing something I believe in than holding back out of fear.

Sam Fuqua: Because this was such an intense, uh, experience and both the response to these many, many critics and then a direct threat of physical violence, uh...

René Marie: Mm-hmm.

Sam Fuqua: ...did it make you think twice about pushing the boundary or crossing the line as an artist...

René Marie: No.

Sam Fuqua: ...later in your career?

René Marie: No, because, you know, hey, black people have been threatened with violence just for walking down the damn street. So, why should I think that if I stop, if I don't do this song anymore, everything's gonna be just fine? You know, our very existence is a reason for some people to kill us, to their way of thinking. So, I can't change that. I can't change that. What I can do is write songs about it and sing about it. And you know, my nieces and my nephews, my sons, my siblings, leave something for them to, I don't know, remember.

Sam Fuqua: Well, thank you so much for your time and your music, and you're so open and thoughtful with us today.



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René

Marie:

Uh, thank you both. Uh, you've given me a lot to think about.

I can't compete. I can't be a good girl and sing standards all nice and sweet. Yes, I know what swing is, but for me, that thing is incomplete. And I mean it, I won't compete.

Sam Fuqua: That's René Marie with her song *This for Joe* from her album, *Black Lace Freudian Slip*. You can hear more at her website, renemarie.com.

Thanks for listening to Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our production team is Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles, Alia Thobani, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. We produce these programs in Colorado on the traditional lands of the Arapahoe, Cheyenne, and Ute Nations. To learn more about the importance of land acknowledgement, visit our website, sidewayspod.org. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.