

Drumming for Change: The Case Study of Rhythms of Resistance Tallinn

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Abstract

Music has long been recognised as a powerful resource for uniting people around shared ideas, making it an effective tool for political activism. In this article, we examine an activist percussion group, Rhythms of Resistance (RoR) Tallinn, to identify key aspects of their activism by analysing video footage of their performance at Tallinn Pride 2023. Additional data include a focus group interview with three RoR Tallinn members and an ethnographic account. Our main research questions are: what key performance practices characterise RoR Tallinn's activist drumming, and how do these practices localise transnational protest repertoires in the Estonian context within the post-Soviet Baltic-Nordic region? Our analysis identified four interrelated thematic dimensions: (1) the use of tactical frivolity; (2) distributed leadership; (3) care across multiple in-group and outward-reaching layers; and (4) embodied individual experience. We argue that RoR Tallinn functions not only as a form of protest but as a care-oriented, embodied practice that sustains activists and

reshapes protest culture through music. By situating this under-researched movement within the Estonian activist music scene, the study contributes to a broader understanding of music activism in the Baltic-Nordic region, demonstrating how musical participation serves as a multidimensional tool for social change, collective identity, and emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS: music activism, identity politics, care, tactical frivolity, Pride, Estonia

Introduction

In Estonia, as in many other countries, music has long served as a tool for raising awareness about pressing social and political issues, reflecting the widely recognised political capacity of music and sound (Sakakeeny 2024: 310). In this article, we explore music activism through a case study of the grassroots anarchist percussion group Rhythms of Resistance (RoR) Tallinn (est. 2018). By focusing on RoR Tallinn, we examine how transnational activist networks and repertoires – such as samba-inspired protest drumming – are adapted to local struggles, in particular those related to LGBTQ+ rights, environmental justice, and anti-authoritarian politics in Estonia.

Earlier scholarship on music activism often focused on Western or Nordic countries (Eyerman & Jamison 1998; Ramstedt et al. 2025). More recent research has expanded geographically, examining, for example, protest music in post-Fukushima Japan (Manabe 2016), political sonic protests in Thailand (Tausig 2019), the sung resistance in post-apartheid South Africa (Jolaosho 2019), the repurposing of antifascist music legacies in the Balkans (Hofman 2020), and ethnographic perspectives on Palestinian protest music (McDonald 2013). Despite this growing body of scholarship, activist music in post-Soviet societies – where civic activism and public protest follow historical and cultural trajectories – remains underexamined. Recent work has begun to address this gap (Dundua 2024, Davidjants & Raju 2025, Raju & Davidjants 2024). Our study of RoR Tallinn within Estonia's civic culture extends this line.

To understand the role of music in everyday do-it-yourself (DIY) activism in this region, our main research questions are: what key performance practices characterise RoR Tallinn's activist drumming, and how do these practices localise transnational protest repertoires in the Estonian context within the Baltic-Nordic region?

Our analysis of RoR Tallinn's participation in Tallinn Pride 2023 suggests that the group approaches music activism as a relational and organisational process rather than a series of spontaneous protests and sees activist music operating not only as a mechanism of message transmission but also as a care-oriented, embodied practice sustaining participation over time. In our view, this shows that activist music sustains protest less through ideological persuasion than through an embodied practice of participation and care that enables the movement to endure. The analysis also shows that RoR Tallinn's activism combines carnivalesque public performances, non-hierarchical group organisation, practices of care, and embodied participation. Taken together, these elements suggest that RoR Tallinn's activist music functions as a social infrastructure that enacts, rather than merely represents, the movement's political message.

The case study reported below demonstrates that music and activism, rather than operating as separate strategies, become intertwined in performance situations to create synergies that allow them to amplify each other. Although grounded in a specific post-Soviet setting – Estonia in the first half of the 2020s – the article offers transferable analytical insight into how transnational protest repertoires are localised in comparable civic contexts, thereby expanding existing scholarship on activist music practices in particular socio-cultural situations.

The cultural roots of RoR Tallinn lie in local anarchist music and activism in Estonia from the nineteen-eighties through the twenty-tens. The group includes members of various nationalities who have come together to employ music activism to address, in the Estonian setting, issues central to the RoR movement: environmental concerns, political change, anarchist ideas, LGBTQ+ rights, et cetera. Given the paucity of academic research on RoR and its history, the following two sections mostly draw on RoR's global website, the RoR Tallinn Facebook page and secondary sources (interviews and ethnographic data – hereafter 'fieldwork materials' (FM)). After presenting the methodology, findings from the case study are discussed, followed by concluding remarks.

Key Concepts in the Service of Musical Protest

The "sonic turn" has recontextualised music within a broader field of sound, foregrounding the social and material contexts in which sound is produced and experienced. This perspective is particularly relevant in protest settings, where soundscapes, voice, listening, and collective presence shape political experience. Scholars have emphasised music and sound's capacity to organise and strengthen social identity, and to model alternative forms of social organisation (Sakakeeny 2024: 310–311). To examine how political meaning is produced through collective sound and movement in public space for RoR Tallinn, this analysis draws on four interrelated concepts: carnival protests – in the form of tactical frivolity; feminist care ethics; distributed leadership; and embodied participatory performance.

The notion of carnival protest draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, characterised by festive, playful practices that defy official culture and established hierarchies. Since the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, such practices have become increasingly prominent in street protests, mobilising humour, celebration, and visual spectacle to foster optimism, empowerment and collective engagement (Hammond 2020: 265–269). The carnivalesque operates as a tactical intervention by creating a temporary break with the accepted social order, joyfully subverting (gender) norms and hierarchies. The slogan "Participate, don't spectate" encapsulates the main ideas of street parties and tactical carnivals by contradicting the idea of experts and opening a space for horizontal participation (Scholl 2012: 86).

Within this broader repertoire of contention – including a range of colourful protest tools extending from assemblies and strikes to artistic and performative actions – tactical frivolity represents a specific anarcho-pacifist tactic that combines colour, sound, and movement with humour to produce non-violent yet creative forms of disruption (Tilly 1995; Scholl 2012: 92). Its effectiveness lies in exploiting the ambivalent position of carnival as poised between aesthetics and politics

(Pereen 2007: 78): carnival protest can both unmask authority and challenge the self-imposed seriousness of traditional leftist activism. As intentional carnival, tactical frivolity deliberately injects the carnivalesque spirit into political action in order to appeal to and engage wider publics (Hammond 2020: 270).

Feminist care ethics conceptualises care not merely as a private or familial activity, but sees it as gendered, raced, and classed. Ethical qualities include attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 1993: 112, 127–136). This positions care as a political practice that can be used to address vulnerability and inequality. Anarcho-feminist approaches extend this perspective by emphasising horizontal power-sharing grounded in mutual care, compassion, survival, and resilience, highlighting how care can structure collective political action and community formation. In such settings, permissiveness and experimentation can open spaces where equal power relations are practiced rather than merely claimed (Jeppesen 2019: 119–120).

Distributed leadership (horizontality) represents the organisational manifestation of prefigurative politics. By rejecting fixed hierarchies and emphasising horizontality, activist groups enact the egalitarian social relations they aim to promote. Rooted in anarchist traditions, prefigurative politics emphasises participatory democracy, horizontality, inclusiveness, and direct action, stressing the importance of practicing non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian forms of social organisation rather than deferring political change to a distant future (Fians 2022).

Within debates on music activism, Green and Street (2018) suggest that musical politics operates across both prefigurative and pragmatic modes. They describe the prefigurative role of music as enabling participants to inhabit desired social relations within the act of musicking itself, while pragmatic practices seek to influence political processes beyond the immediate performance context. This perspective reinforces the idea of music as a space where political relations are practiced rather than merely expressed.

Protest studies have outlined “vernaculars of sonic dissent”, underscoring music and sound’s capacity to foster social cohesion, embodiment, and political expression in direct action (Tausig 2018, Sakakeeny 2024: 312). Building on Blacking’s (1977) notion of embodied politics, protest music is not only heard but also physically felt, enabling spontaneous coordinated movements in collective enactment (Trainor and Hannon 2013: 432). Such shared movement can cultivate collective consciousness and deepen interpersonal connections through musical participation (Blacking 1977: 23). Abe (2018) further demonstrates how street performance can transform protest from a solemn expression of grief or silent mourning into a shared bodily experience through humour, movement, and sonic energy, highlighting the political capacity of musical participation to reorganise how protest is felt.

The embodied dimension is particularly evident in protest drumming groups, such as the RoR movement, where sound and movement function as tools of collective expression in public space. Ellman (2020: 242) identifies two techniques in street marching bands: chant breaks and sonic disobedience. Chant breaks temporarily replace instrumental sound with rhythmic chanting, enabling the crowd to join in, energising the protest and reinforcing collective identity. Sonic disobedience strategically uses the sound to reclaim public space from surveillance and control. Complementing this perspective, Henriques’s (2010: 83) “vibration

model” conceptualises musical participation as the interaction of corporeal and sonic frequencies experienced as vibes rather than abstract knowledge, highlighting how political coordination emerges through shared sensory experience.

Musical Activism and Anarchist Ideas in Estonia

Before introducing RoR Tallinn, we first need to sketch out the local context in which RoR-style DIY anarchist principles in music intersect with humour, feminist thought, green politics, LGBTQ+ activism, and related causes in Estonia. RoR Tallinn did not appear in isolation but emerged from a broader continuum of socially conscious musical practices and anarchist activism in the region, with roots in the late Soviet and the subsequent transition periods. In this sense, RoR Tallinn exemplifies how global movements are adapted to local conditions. The overview below outlines this context and highlights key continuities.

The origins of anarchist musical activism in Estonia can be traced to the 1980s, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Davidjants 2025: 81). In Western Europe and the Nordic countries, including Estonia’s neighbour Finland, the 1980s was a decade that – inspired by punk, anarchism, and libertarian-left ideals – gave rise to protest movements opposing both the welfare state and right-wing politics (Hill 2024). Influenced by these cultural trends and reacting to the local constraints of the late-Soviet period, anarchist musical activism in Estonia was born. The 1986 “phosphorite war” – a wave of protests against Moscow’s plans to start large-scale (environmentally destructive) mining of phosphorite in North-East Estonia – became a catalyst for ecological mobilisation. Punk scenes responded through bands such as J.M.K.E., which combined DIY music practices with anti-authoritarian and pacifist ideas. Their song “*Käed üles Virumaa*” (“Hands Up, Virumaa”) wove together themes of Estonian identity, occupation politics, and potential environmental disaster (Davidjants 2025: 78–84). These repertoires of music-as-protest ultimately led to the Singing Revolution (1987–1991), during which collective singing became an instrument of mass political agency in all three Baltic states (Šmidchens 2014: 3–6).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s, the nexus of culture, heritage and ideological opposition to totalitarianism weakened in Estonia (Davidjants 2022: 7). Nevertheless, the early 2000s saw a resurgence of the anarchist movement. Groups with explicit ideological messages emerged, such as the anarcho-pacifist collective *PunaMust* [Red-Black], founded in 2006 (Muttika 2006). In 2011, an antifascist, non-hierarchical DIY music and culture club opened in Tallinn. Describing itself as a community centre, it also provided rehearsal space for RoR Tallinn, whose members share similar values of social justice, anarchism, and an ethic of care. To date, no other venue in Estonia has maintained such a long and stable history of hosting antifa bands and supporting similar activities (FM: 20.06.2023).

In the 2010s, the global feminist movement of DIY cultural activism in music reached Estonia. LadyFest Tallinn – a community-based, not-for-profit music and arts festival for feminist and women artists – was held annually between 2011 and 2019, bringing together, among others, anarcho-feminist musicians and bands for concerts and workshops (including one led by RoR Tallinn) (FM: 20.06.2023). With

overlapping membership and shared values, these various scenes have often collaborated.

Today in Estonia, there are also non-anarchist artists and music collectives whose work carries a distinctly feminist and human rights message. In addition to a number of other queer bands and artists, a good example is the openly LGBTQ+ mixed choir *Vikerlased*, which is not directly involved in politics but considers it important to perform at Pride festivals to highlight the presence of LGBTQ+ artists – a practice that constitutes activism in its own right (Davidjants & Raju 2025).

Rhythms of Resistance Tallinn in Local and Global Context

The first RoR group emerged in London in 2000 as a response to police repression during the Reclaim the Streets protests (1) and soon developed into an international music-based activist movement. Like many contemporary social movements (Hill 2024), ROR operates as a loosely organised transnational network shaped by shared political principles and local socio-political contexts. Today, the RoR network comprises around seventy-five independent activist drumming groups worldwide (Rhythms of Resistance no date), making RoR Tallinn part of a transnational, anti-hierarchical, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, and anti-racist network committed to social and ecological justice. The movement draws inspiration from Brazil's *blocos afros* of the mid-seventies – a cultural resistance movement rooted in Black consciousness that stood up to military dictatorship (Rhythms of Resistance no date). Similarly, RoR challenges systemic racism, exploitation, and social exclusion in education, employment, and healthcare (Moving Spirits Inc. 2025).

In Estonia, RoR functions both as a part of this global movement and as a localised initiative; in addition to the group in Tallinn (the capital of Estonia) there was, at least until 2022, also one in Tartu. With strong connections to other RoR groups, particularly in Lithuania and Finland, RoR activists in Estonia form an international network – connected via chats and social media – that shares overarching principles while adapting to local specificities. RoR members frequently attend local rehearsals when visiting other countries, exchanging stories of demonstrations, discussing local struggles, and playing together (Dundua 2024: 16).

The blend of global solidarity and localised activism of RoR Tallinn reflects the core principles of the twenty-first century antifascist anarchism (see, for example, Bray 2017), engaging in a wide range of injustices. RoR Tallinn approaches human rights activism intersectionally, recognising oppression in any field. Based on the activists' personal backgrounds and involvement, the group champions causes such as animal rights, LGBTQ+ equality, and environmental justice, while also addressing local concerns from traffic safety to urban nature preservation, campaigning for a fur-free Europe, standing in solidarity with Iranian women, and opposing the Hungarian government and Russia's war in Ukraine (RoR Tallinn Facebook page; FM: 20.06.2023).

Similarly to global RoR, participation in RoR Tallinn does not require having a specific ethnic or linguistic background, as the group includes a significant number of foreign nationals or temporary residents. Organised entirely by volunteers, RoR groups operate on a decentralised and democratic basis, reflecting resistance to

hierarchy. Thus, there is no leader, and decisions are made based on consensus within each group, and newcomers have the same voice as long-standing members (Rhythms of Resistance no date). The distributed (horizontal) leadership style of the group is also illustrated by the position of the *mestre* who leads the group during the performances. The gender-neutral term, which stems from the Afro-Brazilian origins of the RoR, also conveys the egalitarian message that the role is open to anyone.

The practice of distributed leadership extends to musical practice. Members are encouraged to experiment with instruments, become more comfortable with different tunes and sometimes improvise if they want to, instead of strictly following existing score sheets. Such a playful approach to music-making supports a judgement-free space that fosters creativity, collective responsibility, and embodied participation (FM: 20.06.2023).

Street protests constitute a primary arena for RoR Tallinn's activism, where rhythmic drumming plays a central role, functioning as a political act rather than a conventional music performance (FM: 20.06.2023). This aligns with broader scholarship suggesting that in such contexts, music is not the *raison d'être* but serves to amplify protest messages, foster belonging and mobilise collective action (Juris 2014: 244). In such participatory performance, stylised sound and motion are conceptualised most importantly as heightened social interactions (Turino 2008: 28). Thus, RoR Tallinn's activism amplifies their message in a creative and powerful way. As one participant stated, "It's actually a very Estonian thing to fight with music (2), and people can relate to it much more easily than to protests where people just stand there" (FM: 20.06.2023).

During demonstrations, RoR attends to all aspects of the process – from clothing and movement coordination to dynamics between group members – presenting a unified collective expression that functions as a political intervention in public space. For a percussion group, rhythmic coordination combined with actions such as walking elicits spontaneous physical responses and facilitates engagement among participants and bystanders alike (Trainor and Hannon 2013: 432). RoR thus seeks not merely to perform to an audience but to engage everyone present via music, minimising the distinction between performers and participants (Turino 2008: 29).

Musically and performance-wise, the RoR movement is inspired by samba and carnival traditions, which are both carnivalesque in their capacity to challenge hierarchies of power (Hammond 2020: 266). The samba-inspired rhythms characteristic of RoR Tallinn create a joyful musical protest while fostering collective identity and participatory engagement.

With the exception of some local songs and hand signs (FM: 20.06.2023), all groups within the RoR network play the same tunes and use the same signs, enabling them to communicate over loud drumming and form larger groups consisting of different local cells. Several interviewees emphasised the fact that Estonia is a safe place and that they have a high level of trust in law enforcement compared to their countries of origin or residence where this is not necessarily the case. Thus, in addition to music-related signs, safety signals might be used where necessary – for example "Danger!", "Police are coming!", or more personal signals like "I do not feel safe" (FM: 20.06.2023).

The tunes in the RoR sheet book (see sub-section “Player” at RoR global website) hold historical and semiotic significance, often named after certain persons or activism-related symbols known to participants (Rhythms of Resistance no date). While this is not overtly secretive – since all information is publicly available on the RoR website – it provides an opportunity to incorporate additional layers of meaning, particularly in contexts where direct political messaging may be restricted. Each RoR group embraces local influences while avoiding cultural appropriation, and local groups can make tunes which, if sufficiently catchy, may eventually be added to the main site and thus become accessible to other groups in other geographical locations. In the case of Estonia and Finland, the tunes (respectively) of “Kaera-Jaan” and “Pekurinen” have been adapted and added to the sheet book section of the RoR site (FM: 20.06.2023) (for more details see below).

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we analysed one specific event, Tallinn Pride 2023: its musical and visual codes, shouted slogans, and broader social context. The primary dataset consisted of a video recording of the performance, complemented by a focus group interview and ethnographic fieldwork that link observed practices to participants’ interpretations. Special focus was placed on the mental well-being of participants and on the embodied dimensions of performance, exploring how meaning was conveyed not only through sound, but also through movement and affective engagement.

The study represents a collaboration of three authors with complementary expertise in music, activism, and social inclusion. Davidjants works as a researcher in musicology but has also been involved in Estonian feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements. Both Davidjants and Raju have experience with social issues in the public sector. Dundua conducted five months of ethnographic fieldwork with RoR Tallinn for her master’s thesis (Dundua 2024) and continued her involvement with the group for about a year.

Observational data were collected during the Tallinn Pride procession in June 2023, when Raju filmed approximately fifty-nine minutes of RoR Tallinn’s performance with prior consent from participants. She later analysed video data, using the multimodal analysis method to identify multiple musical, verbal, and visual modes of communication both individually and as part of a unified activist message. The footage was systematically reviewed to produce a detailed timeline of activities, leadership transitions, chants, and visual presentation. Following Mondada’s (2008) notion of “naturally occurring data”, the event was analysed across three phases: pre-procession, procession, and post-procession. While repeated viewing enabled detailed annotation, some subjectivity remains due to the challenges of documenting a large moving group in a crowded environment.

A focus group interview providing additional qualitative data was conducted a few days after the procession with three RoR members (all women in their twenties and thirties). Due to the participants’ different linguistic backgrounds, the interview was in English. Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcript was conducted by Davidjants. Video footage was prioritised as the primary data source,

with the focus group interview offering a complementary perspective on the categories identified in the footage, rather than dominating the analysis.

In addition to outsider observations, Dundua, a RoR Tallinn member, provided additional observational data and an insider's perspective based on her ethnographic research with the group. This insider perspective provided a valuable lens for understanding the embodied and communal dimensions of protest music. She subsequently applied qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and to interpret participants' experiences, thereby supporting the integration of insider and outsider perspectives and enhancing reflexivity and methodological triangulation.

Through this analytical process, four interrelated dimensions were identified that structure RoR Tallinn's activism: (a) tactical frivolity as a vehicle for public messaging, (b) distributed leadership within the group, (c) care circulating across multiple relational layers, and (d) embodied experience at the individual level.

Discussion of Findings from Tallinn Pride

The analysis of video data revealed three major thematic categories of performance practices: (1) carnivalesque performativity with emphasis on tactical frivolity (targeted to the public), (2) distributed leadership (targeted to group members), and (3) care across multiple in-group layers (targeted both to the public and to group members). The ethnographic perspective also suggested a fourth category: embodied experience of performance (individual level). The following section will provide a more detailed explanation of each.

Carnavalesque performativity through tactical frivolity: movement and visuals

RoR Tallinn's use of tactical frivolity reflects a joyful life-affirming form of carnival protest that employs humour and peaceful non-compliance to challenge dominant power structures (Starr 2013). According to participants in the interview, the group was formed to bring energy to local Estonian protests, which were perceived as solemn and quiet, consisting of many speeches lamenting what was wrong or getting worse. In contrast, the RoR format offered an opportunity to keep the mood more upbeat and to amplify protest messages through beats and shouts. This aligns with the concept of carnival protest where activists move away from the rigid, often dull traditions of the past – the “march, chant, and listen” model (Hammond 2020: 270; Duncombe 2007: 22). By replacing solemn obligation with collective pleasure, RoR Tallinn lowers the barrier for entry and sustains engagement. The group's participation in selected demonstrations also aligns with this tactic. A notable example is the Goodwill Statement (*Heameeleavaldus*) demonstration in Tallinn Freedom Square. The event was organised by RoR Tallinn against the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*EKRE*) during its stint in power (2019–2021) and designed not so much as a protest but rather as an expression of support – a way to show through positive energy how much happier society would be if queer people had more rights (FM: 20.06.2023).

Tactical frivolity was expressed at the 2023 Pride through the participants' appearance (clothing and accessories), actions (music and dance), and sounds (slogans and chosen rhythms that included samba and a well-known Estonian folk dance), making gender not a stable identity but continuously constituted over time through a stylised repetition of acts (Butler 1988: 519). Following this practice, the performers used makeup, costumes and movement as a means of communicating additional layers of meaning and enriching storytelling (Warwick 2023: 69). Like the spectators, members of RoR Tallinn were dressed in a variety of styles. Some wore casual streetwear and leisure clothing, while others had more elaborate costumes and accessories, such as fancy-dress hats, unicorn headbands, flower wreaths, or bold eye makeup. In addition to their instruments, each participant had a backpack, duffel or tote. The traditional rainbow and transgender flags were worn as cloaks.

This visual styling carried explicit political meaning, as face, hair, and body paint, rainbow shapes and colours, as well as attire and movement, added an additional messaging dimension to the drumming. Since the 2010s, blue – in addition to pink – hair dye has been associated with liberal political views and queer identities (Blue hair 2025). The appearance of coloured hair at Tallinn Pride 2023 further reinforced the tactical frivolous dimension. Several participants also incorporated pink and black elements or black leather items (skirts, coats, or jackets). The prominence of pink evokes the Pink & Silver street tactic introduced by British activists during anti-globalisation protests in Prague, where blocs dressed in glamorous pink and silver performed choreographed chants alongside samba bands. Within this tradition, having fun is treated as a measure of political effectiveness (Scholl 2012: 84–85, 92), an ethos that aligns with RoR's explicitly anti-capitalist orientation (Rhythms of Resistance no date).

Most of the members of RoR Tallinn wore some form of headgear (for example, baseball caps, beach hats or sunglasses), and a few individuals deliberately covered their faces, using masks with eye holes, sweatshirt hoods, or scarves tied in front of their faces. In Estonia's relatively safe policing environment, the use of masks is not intended as protection from the state. For some, during the Pride, this anonymity is an essential form of self-care, offering protection against potential social repercussions in personal life, such as strained family relationships or vulnerability in the workplace. At the same time, tactical frivolity was not an aspect unique to RoR Tallinn because most of the people present were engaging in some sort of performative behaviour. The main feature that set RoR members apart from the spectators was the presence of percussion instruments.

Tunes, dances, and slogans

Sonic metaphors – “being heard” or “having a voice” – are central to the politics of recognition (Weidman 2014). RoR enacted these in performance when instrumental tunes and spontaneous dance breaks alternated with shouted slogans, which were chosen through an inclusive process (FM: 20.06.2023). Some of these – such as “Everybody having fun!” and “Everybody dance!” – carried the vibes of inclusive positivity that the focus group interview also reflected. The tune “Cha Cha Cha”, which was a Finnish Eurovision Song Contest entry of the same year by Käärijä, enhanced the prevailing atmosphere of enjoyment and positivity. These

moments worked as chant breaks: the shift from drumming to shouted slogans briefly expanded participation beyond the band, creating short bursts of shared voice that intensified collective energy. Another set of slogans of significance for the LGBTQ+ community referenced legendary historical events that started the Pride tradition in the West (“We will not be quiet, Stonewall was a riot!”) as well as more general chants (“We’re here, we’re queer, we won’t disappear!”). Some intersectional messages addressed both the LGBTQ+ community and anti-nationalist politics, blending old slogans with new ones (“No borders, no nations, trans liberation!”).

At the beginning of the procession, the group cited the opening lyrics of the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and repeated them when reaching the final stop. As its original performer, Judy Garland, is a widely recognised gay icon (Currid 2001: 123), this framed the performance in a symbolic manner, evoking the image of the rainbow as referenced in the lyrics (see Figure 1). However, due to the dynamic nature of the procession, this symbolism was only perceived by the participants themselves and by those accompanying them throughout the event. While most slogans were shouted in English, the Estonian “*Kõik erinevad, kõik võrdsed!*” (“All different, all equal!”) was repeated the most – nearly forty times. This was also the motto of Tallinn Pride in 2007, marking the final year of the first wave of Prides in Estonia (3). In all, the group’s continuous sonic presence functioned as sonic disobedience: it reorganised attention in public space and made the Pride message difficult to ignore even for casual bystanders (Ellman 2020).

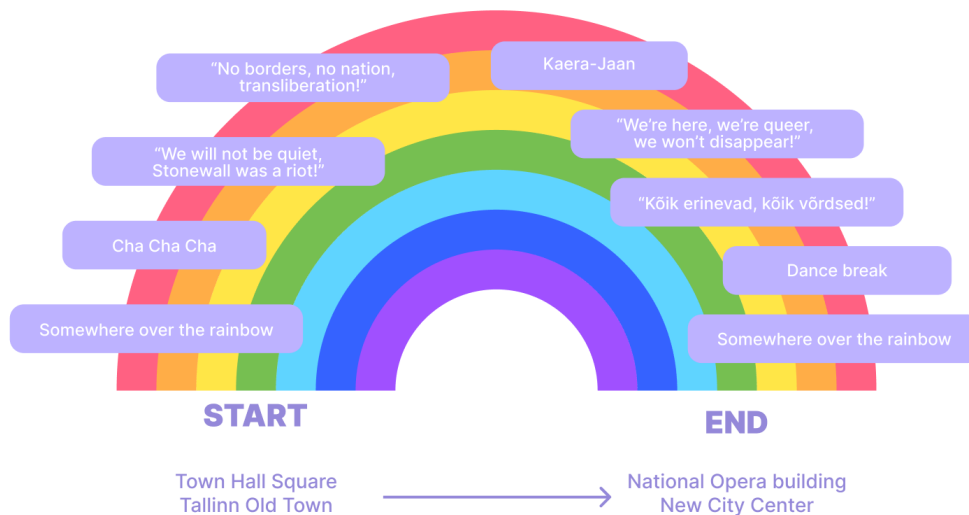


FIGURE 1. Visual representation of the most important slogans and tunes at the Tallinn Pride procession. Shouted slogans are presented in quotation marks, while tune titles are shown without them.

The politicisation of rhythms was less evident in performance but became clear during the focus group interview, where participants emphasised the risk of cultural appropriation – the unacknowledged use of elements of one culture by members of another (Cruz et al. 2023: no page). This reflected their internal awareness of

adopting Brazilian rhythms originating from oppressed communities. Many of the tunes were samba rhythms from the RoR sheetbook, including “Crazy Monkey”, “Custard”, “Nova Balanga”, “Samba Reggae”, “Sambasso”, “Voodoo”, and “Zurav Love”. At the same time, Estonian local tradition was represented by a tune based on the popular folk-dance song “Kaera-Jaan” (4) which was added to the international RoR sheetbook in 2022 (Rhythms of Resistance no date). To acknowledge participants from Finland, the tune “Pekurinen” was performed, named in honor of the Finnish pacifist Arndt Juho Pekurinen (1905–1941), who opposed all forms of violence and refused to join the war (Rhythms of Resistance no date).

Distributed leadership: rotation of mestres and freedom of actions

As noted in Dundua’s fieldwork material (2023), the group’s non-hierarchical structures of care are maintained through regular rotation of participants performing the role of the *mestre* – the person who guides the group’s musical performance using hand signals. The role of *mestre* operates through a set of reciprocal embodied relations rather than through formal authority. It requires heightened visibility, gestural precision, and spatial awareness, particularly since *mestres* often march backwards, facing the band as they navigate the surrounding environment. This embodied orientation creates a two-way system of communication: while the *mestre* guides the group musically through hand signals, band members simultaneously develop and deploy their own gestures to alert the *mestre* to obstacles, uneven surfaces, or disruptions behind them.

The embodied logic also extends to the organisation of leadership. Since the position of *mestre* could be interpreted as similar to the role of a conductor of musical collectives (as person of power), freely rotating it among members is essential. During rehearsals and demonstrations, people are encouraged to assume *mestre* roles according to their comfort level. This decentralised approach demonstrates that leadership is not an instrument of control, but an act of collective care, grounded in mutual attentiveness, where the burden of responsibility is shared to sustain the group’s emotional and musical resilience. From this perspective, leadership emerges within the vibrational field (Henriques 2010: 83): *mestre* roles circulate in response to collective affect and bodily momentum, and RoR’s collective coordination grows out of shared affect and movement, grounded in embodied relations, rather than formal structures. However, equality comes with responsibility. Dundua reflects:

Sometimes the whistle is passed around in a circle of players until someone decides to keep it and become a new *mestre*. [...] For me and many of my group members *mestreting* has also been a position of significant pressure since it carries more responsibilities of making the group sound good. For this reason, people are always encouraged to do a small portion of *mestreting* according to their comfort level to ease new members into this position. Often, experienced *mestres* are guiding or creating *mestreting* workshops for inexperienced group members. (FM: 20.06.2023)

Seen through the feminist care ethic, this permissive leadership structure enables participants to experiment with responsibility and authority, creating conditions in

which horizontal power relations are practiced rather than merely asserted (Jeppesen 2019). This practice exemplifies one of the essential non-hierarchical principles of organising within RoR Tallinn. As articulated on the RoR website, bands operate on a decentralised, consensus-based model in which no one is “in charge”, and *mestres* at large events rotate fluidly, “swapping in and out as mood and movement take them”. In this configuration, authority is neither fixed nor individualised but enacted through embodied coordination and shared responsibility (FM: Dundua 2023). Dundua’s experience was confirmed in the group interview, where participants noted that there is never any pressure on anyone to become a *mestre*.

During the Pride procession, five different *mestres* guided the group, and the last rotation took place after the filming had ended. Four *mestres* participated in the warm-up circle, three of whom also led the procession. One *mestre* who led the procession had not taken part in the warm-up. The final circle was led by a *mestre* who had participated in the warm-up but had not led the procession. Considering that the whole event lasted about an hour, the number of people taking the lead role to demonstrate distributed leadership was significant.

Turino (2008: 29) argues that during participatory music and dance occasions, there is a subtle – and sometimes not so subtle – pressure to join in. However, our analysis offers an alternative view. Members of RoR were free to act as they saw fit during the procession. Some drummers temporarily stopped playing while marching in the procession to record the event with their mobile phones. During the final circle, one of the earlier *mestres* initially did not participate, instead standing outside the circle and observing. The person decided to rejoin only several minutes later, retrieving a drum and moving through the centre of the circle to find a suitable position. No one seemed to mind this behaviour. This flexibility suggests that the value of the performance was grounded less in technical precision than in the quality and intensity of participation. This aligns with Turino’s (2008: 33) distinction between participatory and presentational traditions, where success is measured less by some abstract assessment of the musical sound quality than by the intensity of participation.

Care Across Multiple In-group Layers and its Relation to Activism

An important aspect of RoR Tallinn’s role is the creation of a safe space for people who share a similar worldview – including newcomers to the country – enabling them to collaborate in solidarity toward shared goals.

Shared musical activities such as drumming or listening can generate political “structures of feeling” that counteract fragmentation and suspicion (Hayes 2010 and Stirr 2017 in Sakakeeny 2024: 317). The quality of a performance is also gauged by how participants feel during the activity, rather than by how the music and dance might sound or look to an external observer.

The collective nature of shared music-making activities means a heightened focus on fellow participants. This is one reason why participatory music-dance contributes to the strong social bonding often associated with such practices (Turino 2008: 29). This heightened attention to others also creates the conditions for self-care to emerge – participants described rehearsals and performances as uplifting, confirming that the act of musicking contributed to their mental well-being (FM:

20.06.2023, Small 1998). Both aspects were also observed during our fieldwork in the Pride procession. During Pride, RoR Tallinn did not have a fixed headquarters, which meant that personal belongings had to be carried in backpacks, duffels or totes. Members remained constantly aware of one another, offering practical assistance such as helping *mestres* carry their belongings or distributing sunscreen before the procession began. Many members also used earplugs to protect their hearing in the noisy procession environment. Reading through Tronto's (1993) care ethics, these practices show attentiveness (noticing another member's discomfort), responsibility (offering help), competence (using protective routines), and responsiveness (adjusting support when needed), making care part of what sustains participation. This sense of mutual and personal care was further confirmed in the interview, where participants noted that they supported each other through difficult moods and personal challenges. This was especially true given the anxiety they experienced – both musically (fear of “messing up” the tune) and socially (being part of a protest) (FM: 20.06.2023).

Because street protests are inherently risky, considerable effort is made to create a sense of safety among group members. One example of this support is the “buddy system”, observed by Raju and also described by Dundua:

We usually go to protests in pairs, and often the person with the smaller instrument is paired with the person with the larger one to help each other carry instruments in case we need to run. We also practice non-verbal communication to give each other signs of tiredness or insecurity, which would be addressed by the group. (FM: 20.06.2023)

These practices help maintain the energy needed to sustain the demonstration. Non-verbal communication also includes playful call-and-response moments, where some instruments play a “call” tune to which others respond. RoR members often launch into spontaneous dance breaks as well. Together, these shared practices – both verbal (chanting) and non-verbal (sounds, tunes or movement) – build trust, safety, and joy.

Care for the audience was evident before the procession began, when two groups of spectators positioned themselves beside the convoy and asked questions of the assistant *mestre* (5), who seemed happy to respond to both. Several people in the audience captured the event on camera while encouraging the participants. Additionally, casual bystanders who may not have been familiar with Pride chose to observe the event. It is worth noting that no hostile incidents targeting group members occurred during the Pride procession (6). The group readily allowed spectators to take photos and videos, displaying a positive and accommodating attitude. For example, when playing in the circle at the end of the procession, the assistant *mestre* helped create space for a camera tripod and positioned participants to achieve the best angles for the video. The interview also confirmed that one of the key motivations for RoR Tallinn participants was the direct positive impact on the listeners of the music they created.

Embodiment

Dundua emphasised the fourth category of performance: the embodied character of drumming during the demonstrations. In RoR, the physical impact of playing

shows – involving this type of activism – is not only voiced but felt, lived and carried in the body long after the demonstration ended. This embodied nature of drumming became apparent to Dundua during her first-ever Pride participation in Tallinn as a RoR Tallinn member. At this time, she was already involved with the group and had been attending weekly practice sessions for over two months. Although more experienced members warned her that carrying and playing drums leaves bruises on the body, and suggested using a thick shawl to cushion the spot where the drum rests on the legs, bruising still became an unavoidable part of drumming due to the constant movement while playing – especially since she had chosen to carry the low *surdo*, the largest and heaviest drum.

Since then, Dundua has taken part in many protests, playing different instruments, and has come to realise that bruising is often inevitable – even when carrying a smaller instrument like a snare. For her, the bruising became an important factor in acknowledging that the drum, strapped to her waist and resting on her legs, merged with her body and became its extension. Checking her bruises several days after the demonstration reminded her that she had participated in making the sound not only by beating the drum but through her entire skeletal frame:

Quite literally I was banging on my own bones, making them sing on the tune. During the marching, as a participant, I also learned how to hold the drum to make it sound better or louder, how to position my body in relation to the drum, how to walk and support the drum with my legs, how and where to beat it and so on. This direct connection between my body and the instrument highlighted the embodied nature of the political performance I was involved in. (FM: Dundua 2023)

Thus, embodiment in RoR Tallinn is not a metaphorical attribute but a material condition through which political action is enacted. Embodiment therefore operates not simply as an expressive dimension of protest but as the mechanism through which collective agency becomes physically organised in public space. Political expression emerges through coordinated bodily endurance and rhythmic movement in public space, redistributing political agency through sound, movement, and shared physical presence, to those who might otherwise remain passive observers. In the street, the convergence of music, leadership, care, and political expression transform activism into a lived practice – a feat that the rehearsal space cannot replicate. While organisational principles and repertoires define the group's activist orientation, they gain true political force only through the physical presence and affective attunement in public space.

Discussion and Conclusion

In RoR Tallinn's performance at the Pride, music is transformed from a medium for fixed messages into a lived practice of collective action. The political value of the performance stems not from aesthetic outcomes, but from the intensity of shared responsibility and bodily coordination required to sustain the group's collective presence in public space. By enacting social relations through sound and movement, RoR's music-making functions as prefigurative politics, where the

desired social order is practiced rather than merely represented (Fians 2022). Operating across both prefigurative and pragmatic modes (Green and Street 2018), the band's embodied organisation enacts non-hierarchical sociality while its sonic presence simultaneously amplifies political messages. This dual orientation ensures that activism is not merely representational but a convergence of sound, movement, and organisation as a political action. RoR's explicit rejection of hierarchical leadership does not fully eliminate authority but redistributes it across the group, for example through the rotating *mestre* system that challenges conventional hierarchical models.

This study contributes to research on music and activism by demonstrating how care and embodiment enable political participation. Our analysis of RoR Tallinn's 2023 Pride performance identifies four interrelated dimensions: (1) tactical frivolity, (2) distributed leadership, (3) multi-layered care, and (4) embodied experience. These dimensions directly enact the group's activist goals: chant breaks and sonic disobedience amplify human rights messages, while synchronised actions and role rotation forge a collective identity. Simultaneously, mutual care and the celebratory nature of the performance foster emotional well-being. Together, these interwoven practices show how RoR Tallinn's activism transcends mere performance to build a resilient, supportive, and politically engaged community.

The qualitative case study findings suggest that tactical frivolity was manifest throughout the group's performance – through sound, movement, and visual elements. Their appearance, sound and movement, featuring human rights slogans alongside local and other cultures' rhythms, created an atmosphere that combined activism with joy. By adapting samba rhythms and Estonian folk music, RoR Tallinn's performance merged diverse cultural elements while consciously avoiding cultural appropriation. Although participants did not explicitly describe their involvement in the Pride procession as a performance, their actions resembled an artistic composition, carefully integrating international and local messages significant to the LGBTQ+ community.

RoR Tallinn's musical activism was not only outward-facing but also internally nurturing, reinforcing a sense of community and emotional resilience. Music played a crucial role in this, serving both as a political tool and a source of well-being. This care across multiple in-group layers – both directed to oneself and extended toward others in the group and beyond – was integral to their activism, aligning with a broader understanding of music as a means of fostering individual and collective well-being (Meneghini & Colledani 2024).

In conclusion, RoR Tallinn's performances at Tallinn Pride show how music can be a dynamic force for activism and emotional empowerment, making demonstrations livelier through organised sound. By blending political expression with performance, fostering multi-layered care, and cultivating an inclusive environment for both participants and spectators, the group exemplifies the use of musical activism to shape collective identity and bring attention to issues of social justice.

This study has the following limitations. The first relates to the fact that the empirical core of the data is drawn from a single event (Tallinn Pride procession 2023) – whose dynamic outdoor setting and large crowd interfered with observation and recording to a certain extent. The second limitation is the small size of the focus

group interviewed. This means that the results are specific to a particular event rather than providing an estimate of population parameters. We did not measure downstream impact – for example, the public opinions towards LGBTQ+ community before and after the Pride. Instead, our goal has been to provide detailed descriptions that explain various mechanisms – such as tactical frivolity, distributed leadership, care across multiple in-group layers and embodiment – that can, in principle, be transferred to other studies of activist drumming groups with similar structures and aims. Naturally, any eventual transferability will be conditional and depend on the contextual fit (for example, the movement’s distributed leadership style, repertoire compatibility, and the cultural status of street protest) of the groups compared. Future research could address this through participation counts, media coverage analyses or audibility studies to examine how sound levels and rhythms affect visibility and resonance in public space.

Endnotes

(1) Reclaim the Streets (RTS) is a movement with a shared ideal of community ownership of public spaces. The movement started in 1995 in London and spread worldwide (including Estonia) a few years later. RTS peaked in the beginning of the 2000s but had basically ceased by 2019 (Reclaim the streets 2025).

(2) Reference to the Singing Revolution – a poetic euphemism for the series of national demonstrations between 1987 and 1991, at which collective singing was used as a method of peaceful protest.

(3) The tradition was discontinued due to rising violence and was only reinstated a decade later, as Davidjants recalls from her time doing advocacy work with the Estonian LGBT Association.

(4) After conducting research, the authors found that the song was inspired by a real person who lived in the 19th century. It was originally a satirical song about harassing women, which RoR members would likely not approve of. Over time, the part of the lyrics referring to unethical behaviour has been removed (Raid 2024).

(5) This term was coined by Raju while transcribing the video material. This individual walked alongside the group, mimicking all the mestre’s movements and consistently performing this role throughout the entire event. In the focus group interview, it was explained that this person was chosen for their tall stature, which ensured they remained visible to everyone, regardless of their position in the procession.

(6) On the same evening, a violent incident occurred at an LGBTQ+ bar in the Old Town during a gathering of gay Christians, when an intruder attacked a pastor with a knife.

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Fieldwork materials

- Footage and observation notes from Tallinn Pride, June 10, 2023.
 FM – RoR members, focus group interview, June 20, 2023.

Ethnographic fieldwork materials from May 7 to October 7, 2023, using the methods of observation and participant observation. The fieldwork included:

- participation in weekly potlucks and rehearsals;
- engagement in the planning and performance of public demonstration (Baltic Pride) alongside RoR bands from multiple cities;
- participation in the collaborative planning and facilitation of a three-day self-organised RoR camp with members of the Tallinn and Tartu RoR bands.