



strategy + support for
musicians creating change

Air Traffic Control

1475 15th St. San Francisco, CA 94103 | 415.255.0331 | www.atctower.net

CASE STUDY: How ATC Helps Musicians Connect to Advocacy - Damian Kulash, OK Go
Damian Kulash, the lead singer for OK Go, arrived at the ATC New Orleans Artist-Activist Retreat like many of the artists who attend our retreats--a little unsure of what he was getting into. OK Go was known as a hard working, constantly touring pop band that had only recently begun to see the type of commercial success it hoped for. But it had yet to incorporate activism into its music or engagement of fans in any major way.

So it was both strange and wonderful for Damian to be joining the ranks of the Indigo Girls, members of REM, Pearl Jam, and My Morning Jacket on one of our three-day retreats designed for musicians to share experiences and best practices around activism, learn from specific social, policy and environmental experts, and witness first-hand how New Orleans and her music community have been working to rebuild years after the floods and in the face of unimaginable obstacles.

It quickly became apparent that Damian was going to be a star pupil—he took notes; asked tough and smart questions; came to early-morning issue briefings, including one on media policy and internet neutrality; and opted to perform during the last night’s benefit concert with a local brass band he had never heard of nor played with before, but whose members had painstakingly translated several OK Go songs into musical notation so that trombones and tubas could play them. The result of their musical collaboration was mind-blowing for both musicians and audience, and the start to something incredible. As Damian stumbled off the stage, he said, “I may never be able to play with my band again.”

The next week he wrote ATC to say, “I had an amazing time this weekend. After a couple days of revelation, looking straight in the eyes of tragedy, it was a sweet catharsis to be involved with such great music and great people. I’m really excited about taking this to the next step and doing some[thing] together.”



And that he did. Instead of leaving the band to take up New Orleans brass, Damian fused what he knew with what he had learned—both musically and with his newfound activism. He brought his entire band back to New Orleans two months later, collaborating with New Orleans brass band, Bonerama, to record a digital EP based on the original performance at our retreat. The EP, called “You Are Not Alone”, was intended to also raise money for New Orleans rebuilding, and to support it the two bands performed several live shows, including one on the David Lettermen Show and one in Washington D.C. that brought many influential D.C. movers and

shakers out for the event. The album received [spectacular reviews](#)¹, and raised over \$40,000 that helped buy a new home for legendary musician, Al “Carnival Time” Johnson in the Musicians Village. Al moved into his new home in December 2008.



Al's house after the levees broke just three blocks away. The floodwaters pushed it into his neighbors house.



Al on the porch of his new house in the Musician's Village, purchased with funds raised by ATC artists, including those Damian raised.

But this was not the end of Damian’s activism as our work helped him recognize not only the importance and uniqueness of New Orleans; it also helped him understand policy and the urgent need for action. In early 2008, Damian and another band mate took a trip to Capitol Hill to testify on [Net Neutrality](#)² with our partner organization, [Future of Music Coalition](#)³. He opened his testimony by saying, “I’m a rock singer, so I’m used to speaking my mind in front of a mic,

¹ Read one review at <http://www.luminomagazine.com/mw/content/view/2359/4>

² For more about net neutrality, please go to this wikipedia page. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_neutrality

³ More about Future of Music can be found at <http://www.futureofmusic.org/>

but to be honest, this isn't the crowd I'm used to.” He went on to give testimony, to talk privately with policy makers, to encourage his fan’s to call their members of Congress and to pen an [op-ed piece](#)⁴ published in the NY Times. Media policy experts credit Damian’s dedication and work as critical to several key legislative and court wins on the issue.



Damian would never have had the confidence or resources to engage at this level if an organization had just called up one day and said “We would like you to do a benefit for New Orleans next week” or “Tell us what you think of net neutrality”. Indeed, Damian’s work is a perfect example of what musicians are capable of doing when they deeply care about and understand an issue, and are properly resourced and supported.

Damian and his band mate Andy give impromptu concert on Capitol Hill after giving their testimony just a few hours earlier.

Air Traffic Control (ATC) exists to help musicians play an effective, unique and vital role in the promotion of social justice. Musicians and managers established ATC five years ago to assemble an experienced and trusted team of leaders, resources and tools that would help them to create more effective social change collaborations with each other and with social justice organizations. As a result, ATC became an artists’ air traffic control—one that develops capacity, efficiency, and coordination to produce stronger and more creative social change partnerships. For more information, please go to www.atctower.net.

⁴ Read Damian’s Op-Ed piece at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/05/opinion/05kulash.html>