

**W**hat's in a name? Well, sometimes everything. Australian indie pop/rock band, Rudely Interrupted, based in Melbourne, was given its name by lead singer, Rory Burnside.

He was born with severe mental and physical disabilities he felt had rudely interrupted his life. Burnside was born without eyes, lives with the behavioural disorder of Asperger's syndrome, epilepsy and has had numerous surgeries for a bilateral cleft palate. He is not alone either, being one of three of the four band members living with a range of equally severe mental and physical disabilities, including Asperger's syndrome, autism and Down syndrome.

It has meant exclusion from a lot of what the world has to offer the rest of us – that is, until they started making music. These days the band's name might just as well refer to them doing the interrupting ... of the music world.

From the moment the band played its first gig in a Melbourne pub in 2007, they hit the ground running. Within a year they were invited to play at the UN in New York for International Disability Day, the first time ever for any Australian band. They played to a full house. U2's Bono drew only half that audience when giving a speech at the UN two months earlier.

They also played other venues while in New York to rave reviews. *The Village Voice* described them as a band: "with a taut, impassioned sound somewhere between The Killers and Wire (this band) happens to be the real deal".

The trip was successful beyond their wildest dreams. It kicked off their first world tour, the release of several records, commercial airplay, an AFI-nominated documentary and, last year, they were nominated for the Melbourne Music Prize for best emerging artists.

Rudely Interrupted has made the music world sit up and take notice but not as much notice as their able-bodied fellow band member, manager and mentor Rohan Brooks, knows they deserve. Mainstream music is hard to crack, but Brooks believes the band is too strong to be ignored.

Exclusion is something that Brooks has never liked. He first met Burnside at a barbecue. Noticing that Burnside's brothers were taking advantage of the fact that their brother was blind by stealing the food off his plate, Brooks intervened. A part-time disability support worker, Brooks has been looking out for Burnside ever since along with the rest of his fellow band members.

An experienced musician himself, having been the drummer in former Melbourne group The Anyones, supporting big acts such as Jet and The Killers, Brooks was running a music therapy class to help people with disabilities. It was there that Burnside and his now fellow band members met and began their musical journey together. Brooks' only intention was to bring some improvement to their lives., and that was beyond anything any of them expected.

"I kept setting the bar high and they just kept jumping over it," says Brooks.

Once they had a lead singer who happened to be blessed with perfect pitch (Burnside) and a drummer (Josh Hogan, autistic) who could keep perfect time, Brooks knew he had a band in the making.

Brooks, who plays guitar, writes the band's songs with lead singer Burnside. The ideas often flow from their conversations. Their first song *Don't Break my Heart* arose out of a



Josh Hogan, Rory Burnside, Rohan Brooks and Sam Beke formed Rudely Interrupted 10 years ago

# RUDE DUDES

A talented rock band with a range of mental and physical disabilities is challenging the mainstream music world and making critics sit up and take notice

WORDS SARAH HENDER

question that Burnside asked Brooks when he lost his favourite teacher to cancer: "Can you die of a broken heart?"

"I almost went into the whole scientific thing of that experience," says Brooks. "He wasn't really interested in all that, he just wanted to know if you can!"

**I**t hasn't been an easy ride. An AFI-nominated documentary about their debut overseas trip to the UN was independently released by the band and premiered nationally on the ABC in 2009.

It is revealing about the sorts of trials both the band members and their manager faced during the tour.

One scene shows the band pulled over in their van with Brooks attempting to grab a few minutes rest before continuing to drive on to their next destination. Burnside is shown having a meltdown in the back seat, counting out the minutes aloud insistent that Brooks has had enough sleep and it's time to get going again. It is a moving scene. Brooks explains patiently why he should be able to get some sleep and resolves to do that while Burnside wrestles with himself but learns strategies to get through the moment.

It leaves you impressed with them both.

The behavioural problems of the band members have reduced markedly since then. The band is the best thing that has happened. not just musically but personally. It is unlikely that the opportunities they now have would have ever come their way without it.

"I was not going to be doing much with my life, to be totally honest," says Burnside. "These guys have taught me so much, so many concepts I would otherwise have not been able to grasp such as social skills, self-discipline, work ethic."

The need to raise money to fund their music-making and the tours that promote it

means that they have had to seek grants from disability organisations. In that they have been highly successful but it has also meant some sidelining from mainstream music. For Brooks, it shouldn't be mutually exclusive.

"When I met Rory, his behaviour was challenging but his musicianship was better than mine. There was something wrong with the world that a guy like this would never be able to get the opportunities that I've had in my career even though he's a better musician than me," says Brooks.

**"We'd be mad not to (shoot for the stars). If you don't try you ... know nothing will happen!"**

The usual response from their audiences goes something like this: "I'd heard of you but didn't know how good you were," says Brooks. "It's insulting," he says. "What they mean is, we've heard of the disabilities, we didn't know about the music."

From an outsider's point of view, they have kicked a lot of goals, performing and touring more than a lot of bands out there. So, what else does Rudely Interrupted want to achieve?

Brooks' aim is for the band to play with the top bands in the world. Yes, he is serious.

They came close to doing that in August of this year, with an invitation to play alongside U2, Katy Perry and Stevie Wonder for the release of their new record *Love You Till I Die*. Sadly, it never eventuated for reasons not

explained but Brooks suspects the band's disabilities mean they don't easily fit the mould. It was a setback but not a full stop.

The band is soldiering on, believing in the adage that the cream always floats to the top. Playing in the big league means that once a song is released, there is no time to bask in the glory, the next body of work must be ready to go. Their latest record released last month *Love You Till I Die* has proven the band can do just that. The title song has the band's signature energy and is so endearing it would be an easy fit for a romantic comedy. The band believes it is their best work yet.

Helen Marcou, co-founder of recording and rehearsal house Bakehouse Studios, agrees: "It is a stand alone very strong pop song, it's really catchy. They are destined to become a household name, in my opinion. You can see them on the stages of Splendour in the Grass or any of the local music festivals."

Last month Rudely Interrupted headed off on their 14th world tour to Europe to promote their new record in Berlin, Sweden and Poland. The band was the headline act for the Australia-Berlin Arts Exchange supported by Arts Access Australia showcasing artists with disabilities from around the world.

The camaraderie of other bands who have faced similar challenges was something that Rudely Interrupted enjoyed for a change. Until now they have been doing it alone on the road as there are not many role models.

After 10 years, Rudely Interrupted still love what they do. The band considers their biggest achievement is staying together for so long and remaining good mates.

And they are still shooting for the stars. "We'd be mad not to," says Brooks. "If you don't try you definitely know nothing will happen!"

**Rudely Interrupted will play at Fowlers Live on November 19 at 4pm, moshtix.com.au**