

Sincerely:

Why Teens Write Music



By Julie Henderson

To the music.

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Foreward

I parked my car and checked that I had everything before I got out. Keys, cell phone, ticket, camera. My heart is racing as I try and hurry to get to the venue, but once I get out of the parking garage, my nonexistent sense of direction kicks in. I don't know which way to turn. I quickly make a choice and, a block into the journey; I realize it's the wrong one. I hurry in a huge circle, feeling out of breath, and worried that I would miss the beginning of the show. I was an hour away from home, in San Francisco, going to a battle of the bands to listen to A Glass

Gesture. The three guys in AGG, all 17, were friends of mine. I wasn't going only to support their band but also to shoot photos for this project.

The door for Slim's was corded off by dirty, old velvet rope. Loiters outside sized me up as I handed the bouncer my ticket. I could only imagine what they were thinking, looking at the way I dressed and wore my hair. Everything was about image here. Some stared at the camera hanging around my neck. Right inside the door I was asked to produce ID if I was twenty one or older.

I shook my head and two stamps were smashed into the back of my hands to prevent underage kids from trying to buy alcohol inside.

Up the stairs, my eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. I arrived just in time. Their first song was starting as I pushed through a sea of bodies to get closer to Ben and the other boys so I could get nicely angled shots. Each song they played was familiar. I had been there at their first show, and subsequently at most of their other shows. I had helped burn and label the first batch of demos, and even sat outside of the garage they played in, so I could secretly listen to their music.

My first love lies in the arts. I've grown up on the stage, acting in play after play. I've taken photos since sixth grade, written poems and stories since I could first string a sentence of words together, and just recently picked up painting. I've tried my hand at music but have resorted to just enjoying the songs other people play. I know why I act. I know why I write, paint, and photograph. But I don't know why my friends write music.

I had a suspicion. I started art early, but my love for my mediums didn't form until I reached high school. It was about this time that I started to understand abstract ideas, such as love, or I tried to comprehend infinity and mortal

ity. What my mind was now capable of understanding was the inspiration for my art, and the drive behind my work. Perhaps this was the same for musicians.

Figuring "Why do you write music" was a very personal question, I didn't expect to find much on the internet, but knew that I would have to go out and ask the question myself. On various blogs, I found a few responses, some along the lines of: "In playing music... one realizes how much of the world is unspoken and attempts to speak it"¹, which seemed similar to what I was hypothesizing. But then I found one interview where a composer said, "How we communicate varies enormously, but I cannot imagine any composer not wanting to have his or her music to be played, to be heard, and to be reacted to. Otherwise it would make no sense to work in such a completely abstract framework. It would be meaningless."² I was intrigued by the bizarre response, since it didn't fit with my previous knowledge, so I wanted to ask the teens that I interviewed if this was the case for them.



M



Previous: A Glass Gesture plays in San Francisco.
Allen, 17, practices drums in his garage.



Ben

Guitarist



Ben smiles. He is a slim kid at the age of 17 but with personality and wisdom that exceeds his frame. Talking to him was like reading a book, I just had to pry open the cover and all of his stories and ideas and opinions came pouring out. When he gets excited talking about a subject, he would move around, and his crazy, curly hair would get in his face, only to force him to pull it back.

“I started playing guitar because of my uncle, Craig. I used to live in Chicago and I lived across the street from him. And I always used to see him playing guitar and he’d always

play it at all of our little family get-togethers and parties. So I just wanted to learn how to play. And he bought me a guitar for my tenth birthday, and he started to teach me how.”

Currently, he plays in a band with two of his best friends, Evan and Charlie. Together they make A Glass Gesture, the band I went to see in San Francisco. To him, A Glass Gesture is the most serious the three of them have been about music.

When I ask him the question of why he wrote music, he struggles to form his open-

ing thoughts but when he does, the words flow from his mouth, “We don’t write for fame and money. It’s just something you can’t explain because it just feels right. You really get to know somebody on a different level, and you really get to express yourself on a completely different level than you ever could with language, or even anything visually. I think it’s a lot more genuine than a lot of other things, a lot of other forms of expression.”

Without an audience, he would still write music. He sees it as being for himself above anything else. He loves to play in front of an audience and see their response and get their feedback, but he realizes that he can get the same feedback from his reactions as he writes the song.

Ben doesn’t write music to please people, he doesn’t write music for money. He writes music because he has to. “Whether you’re a musician or not, music is such a deep part of human nature.” To him, music is rhythm, and rhythm is found in everyone’s life. “Music is often a mirror. Relating to music and enjoying a certain type of music is a mirror for their experiences.” In his opinion, “If music didn’t exist, humanity wouldn’t exist. Just because music is a different for of expressing human desires and fears and jealousy and love and

all these things people can’t describe ever. That you can’t describe why people need love; you can’t describe why people music. It’s who we are; it’s a part of human nature.”³



“Music is a different form of expressing
human desires
and fears
and jealousy
and love
and all these things people can’t describe ever.”

~~THE~~ Green Asylum

- Oh, but to pick the fruit of her discovery.
- These fragments are her unanswered questions!
- Water drops on her green asylum.
- And to taste would be forbidden, returning her to the earth where she and they both remain prisoners of her fortune.
- Because flesh tastes the same between curiosity's jaws, and it is only this flesh that can return her to that which she knows.
- ~~With the fork in the road bring her back to her blood.~~
- Her heart beats in their hands knotted with the toils of picking fruit.
- ~~Her eyes are reflected in the dark. (repeat)~~

She has become so distant that the medium for creation doesn't come without falling back to the force of the masses.

Summation, don't sing

Charlie, 17, plays bass in a show at Slim's, San Francisco.



GIVE ME SET!

ativa

Resistie

1

CD-R

1



Previous: Bag of cds in Leslie's room.

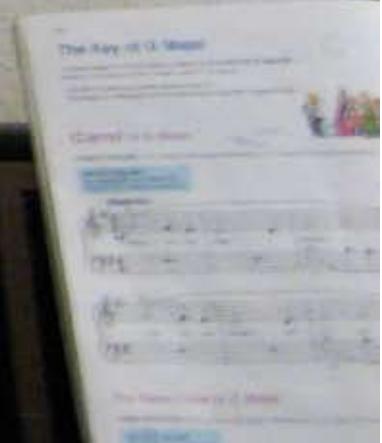
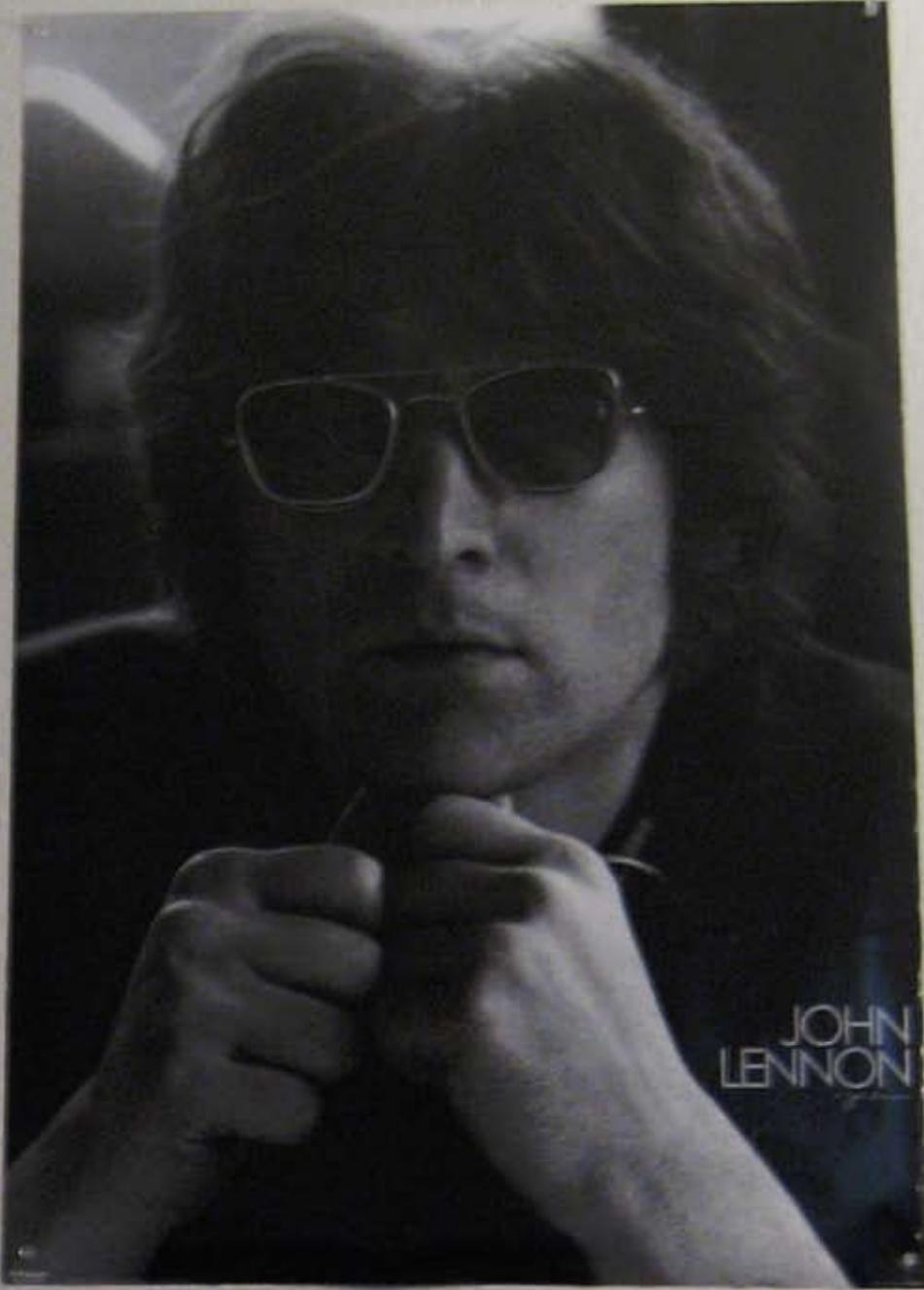
Tone and Volume knobs on an electric guitar.

Next: Posters of Leslie's musical idols abover her bed.



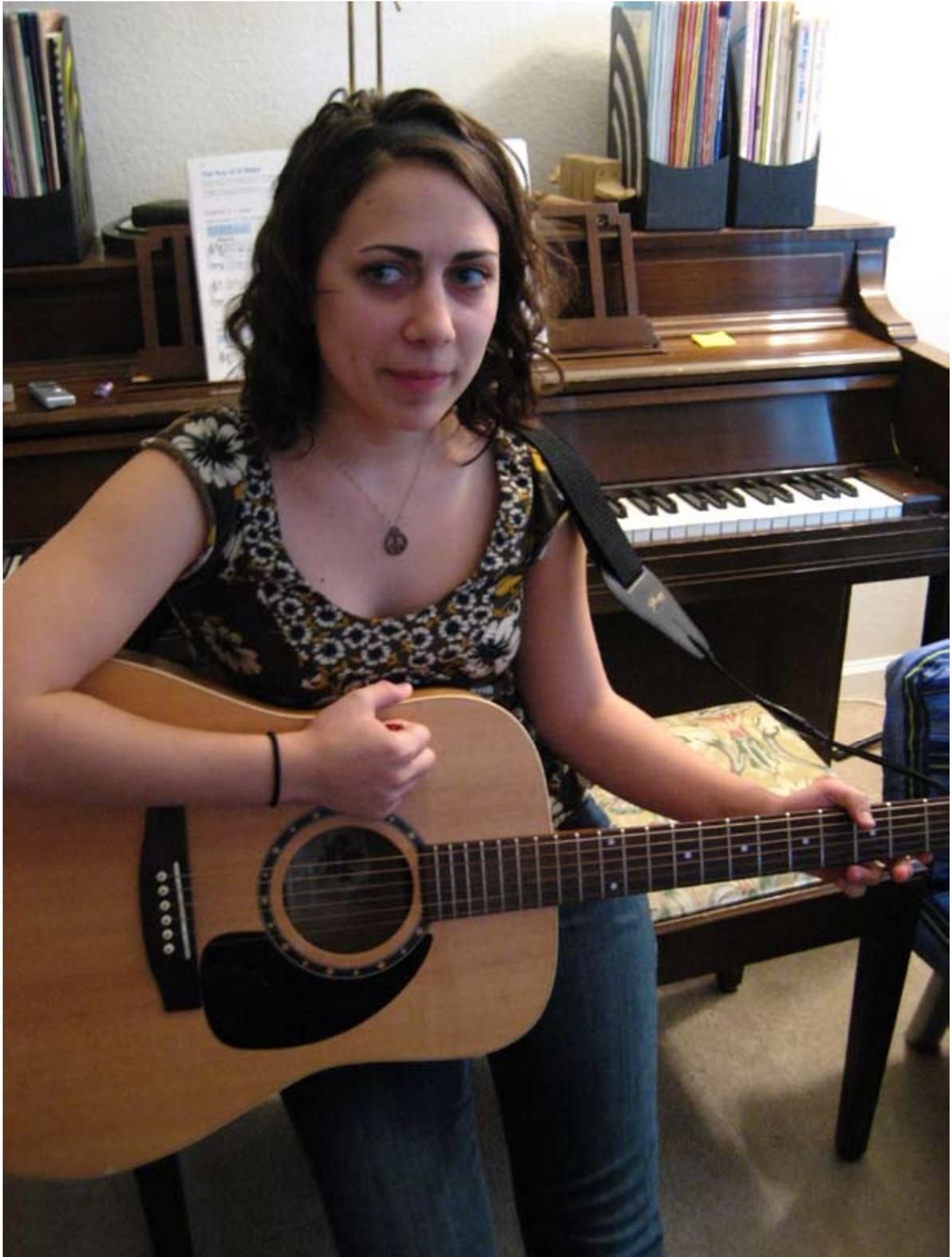


BEACH BOYS - OUTRAGE FOR HISSER, MANCHESTER OIL, LONDON, NOVEMBER 1964



Leslie

Guitarist



Leslie is an avid member of our high school's theatre department, and she sings in the choir. So performing is in her blood. She picked up the guitar less than a year ago and now is playing in a band with a couple of girls from her choir. "It's just easy to express my feelings with a guitar."

She's a small girl, but her heart is huge. She perched nervously on the piano bench in her room to answer our questions. Being the youngest of my interviewees, at the age of 16 (it was her birthday when we interview her), so I was interested to see how she would

answer our questions.

Nearing the end of high school and looking forward to the future of college and the working world is a time when a lot of my classmates have started thinking about what they love and why. Leslie, only a sophomore, hasn't quite reached this step, so the interview was the first time she really put thought into why she was so passionate about the things she loved.

After some time trying to figure out why she wrote music, Leslie looks me square

in the eye and says, “Music is, for me, a way to be vulnerable in front of people without having to have them necessarily know what I am talking about.” She can stand up on stage and sing about an event that was hard for her, and not worry about making anyone uncomfortable. The people that go to her shows expect her music to be from the heart and that’s what they get. To Leslie, music is a way to bear her soul without worrying that it will be hurt in the process.

She went on, “I could not imagine my life without music. At all. Period. That is what I do. Not even writing my own music – yea, that is really important – but being able to sing or just do something with music, listen to it, anything. It’s the most intense form of art, for me.” Leslie finds power in a single song to send shivers down her spine, or communicate a world of emotions in a few simple words and chords. She doesn’t see any other art form as being capable.⁷



“Music is, for me, a way to be
vulnerable
in front of people.”



Evan C., 18, starts his show off wildly.



Lance, 17, records trombone for Circumsax.



Allen avidly explains his love for music.



Evan A., 17, plays drums at a show at Slim's, San Francisco.



Allen

Drummer



To say Allen is outgoing would be an understatement. Allen is a furious ball of energy just waiting to be released. When I first met him, over a year ago, at a battle of the bands hosted by my school, Allen was ready to dance to the music, air drum and joke around with me. And we hadn't talked for more than a minute.

I was excited to find out that Allen was a drummer, because at the time I was attempting to learn the same instrument. But when I found out how serious

he was, I was a little shy when it came to talking about my musical escapades or lack thereof. So as I'm interviewing him, I am a little surprised when he looks me straight in the eye and said, "I don't even feel like a musician right now. I feel more like, I'm kind of approaching and everyone's kind of perpetually approaching that. I feel right now I'm starting. Like I'm kind of on the brink of delving really deeply into what it is to actually be a musician and to submit yourself to learning music and submit your

life to music.”

Allen doesn't write music, in the typical sense that he will sit down and write a song with words and a melody and rhythm. But he will write drum solos for himself to play on his own. These solos never get to an audience, but he still writes and plays them anyway. Music is a way for Allen to feel like he has made progress or achieved something during the day. He feels frustrated leaving school after a day of being lectured at, but after practicing on his drums, he has accomplished something.

Music was obviously very important to Allen. Not only is it his outlet after a day at school, accomplishing nothing, but to him, it was his way to express and to be human.

“There's actually a quote I like by the comedian George Carlin which was ‘Music and art are what humanity could have been had not the traitors and priests gotten a hold of us.’ I think music and art are really just our most basic goodness coming out, it's the basic purity and the basic love and emotion coming out like in the rawest form.”⁶



“If I feel like I’ve been hitting a wall
all day long I can finally progress and
make a step forward in my music.”



The piano in Leslie's room.



Teens stand at a merchandise table at a band show.



Margaret

Guitarist



*M*argaret answers her front door with damp hair and a smile on her face. “Did you clean yourself up for us?” I joke.

“No, I’ve just been running.”

Margaret is determined. That’s always been a word I would think of to describe her. She is determined at school, in her work, and her play. She leads me up to her room and asks what kind of questions she was going to answer. When found out I was going to ask, “Why do you write music”, she grimaced. She told me that it was a tough question. She had a story as to why she started writing mu-

sic, but it might make her cry.

Margaret started playing guitar in sixth grade, but really got involved in seventh grade, right around the time she started writing music. In seventh grade, her aunt was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It’s the most dangerous form of cancer, and can spread quickly before it is noticed, making surgical removal impossible⁴. When they found out the diagnosis, the whole family was devastated. “When I started writing, it was just so therapeutic. My mom was gone a lot when

her sister was sick so I could talk to my guitar like I would talk to my mom. I actually wrote a song for my aunt on the plane when I went to see her. I sang it to her sisters; I sang it to her; I sang it to her daughters, and I also sang it at her funeral.”

Open mics are a favorite of Margaret’s. She loves to get up and sing in front of everyone. “I love hearing ‘You’re so great’ or ‘You’re so terrible’. I want to know what can make me better.”

Music is her inspiration and her crutch for life. She admires Ani DiFranco and Aretha Franklin (with whom she dreams of singing with one day). “I owe a lot to [music], and I do think that if it wasn’t in my life; if I didn’t have inspiration from different artists, I wouldn’t be the same person.”⁵



“I think that if it wasn’t in my life;
if I didn’t have inspiration from different artists
I wouldn’t be the same person.”

"High off Love"

Is it true you can get high off of love?
With just a kiss or even a hug?
Is it true if you start to share?
You'll find the people who truly care?

Cause there's so many people out there ^{to meet}
Just start with the people who pass you on ^{the street}
Just a little smile and a wave
You never know you might brighten ^{day,} someone's

Cause... Is it true you can get high off of love?
With just a kiss or even a hug?
Is it true if you start to share?
You'll find the people who truly care?

Love the people you call your friend ^{the end}
Cause I'll tell you now you'll need them in
Love them like a sister or brother
Then your relationship will last forever.

Is it true...

Is it true you can get high of my love
With just a kiss or even a hug
Is it true if you start to share
You'll find the people who truly care

Evan C. sets up to play his set.

Next: Jeff's saxophone case covered in stickers



CONSCIOUS

RULLY STORE

ABBEY ROAD

CITY OF

W/13

SA

Barcode label with text: **SPS 9511**





ROLL
ROCK AROUND

BMW

Jeff & Aaron

saxophonists



Aaron and Jeff sit side by side in a home office covered in music posters and littered with instruments. They cradle their saxophones in their laps and they tell me the story of how Circumsax, their band, got started. The band is made up of 9 members who combined their love for music and their Jewish culture to create a group that is popular on campus.

The two are good friends and often spend time bouncing jokes around rather than getting to the heart of my questions. When I first get to Jeff's house to interview them,

they get excited at being on camera and ask if they can have props in the shot. When I tell them they can, Jeff scuttles around the room and pulls out his dad's trumpet. "I can't play it, I just think it looks cool," he tells me. Once the camera is rolling, they build off of each other's answers with jokes and laughing. I sit and watch their banter but don't say anything, or I'd feel as if I was interrupting a treasured movie.

Once they get down to business, Aaron says, "I think that music is one of the highest

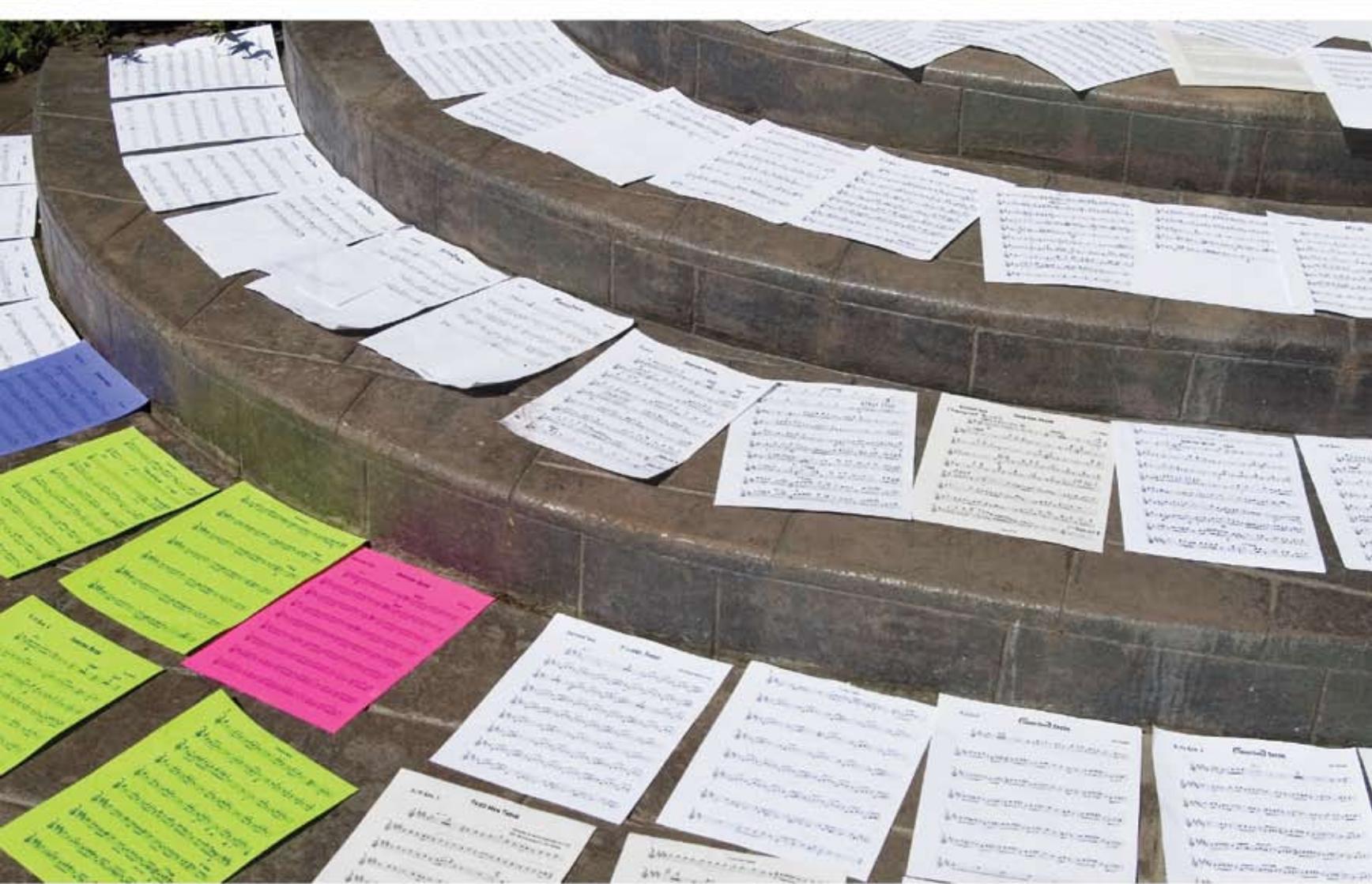
forms of expression.” If these two weren’t as developed as they are now, they wouldn’t be able to use music to express themselves. Since it is so valuable, they can communicate complex emotions in just a simple song. “That’s a really cool feeling and a good way to express and help other people understand what you feel.”

Music to Jeff is something that he can create and call his own. On the wall, three copy rights hang for songs that he’s written, and when Aaron points them out, Jeff beams. He is proud of his music, even if it never makes it out of his computer or folder.

Aaron and Jeff have been close friends for a long time. They spend time together in school, playing in Wind Ensemble, and outside of school, playing in Circumsax. Music is the center of their friendship and it makes the bond strong. Jeff talks a little about what being in a band is like, “I always kind of thought that being in a band was like being in a kind of relationship. Like breaking up a band is like breaking up with your girlfriend or your boyfriend. Really strong bonds are formed between musicians when the chemistry is right. Like Aaron and I; we’re dating musically. I’d say.” Aaron looked at Jeff and laughs.⁸



“Being in a band is like being in a relationship.”



Previous: all of Jeff's compositions.
A painting by Ryan, 18.







Previous: Margaret plays guitar outdoors.
Shirts for sale, designed for a teen band.



Circumsax came together through a love of their Jewish culture.



Afterward

Teens don't write music to earn money. They don't write it to become famous, or even popular at school. They don't want to irritate their parents or neighbors with noisy band practices in the garage.

Teens write music to express complex emotions, ranging from love to betrayal to frustration. They write it to connect with an audience or their bands mates, or to just use a song as a diary entry and pour out their heart. And most of all, they write music because they have to; because they can

think of doing nothing else.

These teens don't need an audience to empower their music. All they need is their own ears and they will feel just as gratified. Music isn't just a pastime, it's their way of life, and without it, life would be meaningless, empty, and hard.

I think that art, of all kinds, is an important part of being human, and especially growing up. It helps exercise creativity and can be an outlet for otherwise overwhelming emotions. Art helps people learn to grow up, just as music has helped these

Notes

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About the Author

Julie Henderson appeared on stage for the first time at the age of 5. The harsh lights must have damaged her eyes because from that moment on, she could only focus on art. In seventh grade, a friend handed her a Goo Goo Dolls album, suddenly music was different, and music meant something to her.

Between her love for art and music, Julie entered as a student at the Freestyle Academy for Communications Arts and Technology. There she learned to develop her visions. As a part of the documentary unit, this book was born. But it was more than just an assignment to Julie. It was a quest. So if you are reading this, then that means, Mission Accomplished.

