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Power Chord Academy lets teens take a strum at being rock stars



(By Haley Edwards) In a sweltering, unfurnished dorm room on the University of Washington campus in late July, five high-school boys played at being rock stars.

The squealing guitar riffs and staccato punk beats of their band's only song arch and twist through the abandoned collegiate hallways. The band's lead singer, 16-year-old Isaiah Brown, wails into the microphone - a guttural, inscrutable chorus - then shakes a mop of brown hair out of his eyes. He kneels, as rock stars do, into the tide of his own sound, and his silver lip-ring glints in the light from a screened window. When practice ends, the rock stars are gone, their affected cool having faded with the last riff.

In their place, five lanky teenage boys. Brown, who was a moment ago an impossibly cool metalhead, plunges his hands deep in the pockets of his ripped jeans and shifts his weight from one rubber-toed black Converse sneaker to the next.

So is the fate of PLAID, Brown's temporary punk-metal band, assembled and then disbanded during a week at Power Chord Academy. This "Rock 'n' Roll Summer Camp," as it's called by kids and counselors alike, hosts about 60 kids a week, ages 12 to 18, at a handful of major cities around the country. This is the first year PCA has come to Seattle, for two weeklong sessions.

The premise of the camp is simple: On Sunday, kids show up with their instruments and are placed in one of 12 bands, each of which gravitates toward a musical genre, depending on the band members' predilections. It's not unusual for a kid who's used to breezy alternative rock to end up in a hardcore metal band.

"We all have different styles of music and at first we couldn't agree on anything," says Garrett Hackler, 15, one of the three guitarists in PLAID. "We just fought for a whole day. And I wanted everything to be my way. I'm a total princess."

"If he's the princess, then I'm the queen," says Leo Shiv, 13, Hackler's bandmate. "But it's good for you because it forces you to compromise, and in the end, you come up with something you never would have on your own."

WORKING FOR RADIO-READY

The newly formed bands are charged with the task of writing a song - beats, bass, guitar, lyrics and all - practicing it, and naming their band on Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday and Thursday, they record their tunes in a professional sound studio, which the camp arranges with a sound technician. And on Friday, they create a stylized music video, complete with special effects. On Saturday night, the bands make their debut and swan song all at once, during a performance in front of their friends and family.

For some kids, that's the first time they've ever performed in front of an audience. For others, stage fright is old hat. The kids' technical experience runs the gamut as well.

Some are self-taught guitarists with garage bands of their own; others are classically trained vocalists who have never set foot outside a practice room.

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Regardless, for this week, they all learn to be rock stars - fleeting, temporary images of the ultimate cool, complete with squealing chords and head-banging sets.

With a price tag of \$1,595 per session, the camp isn't a hotbed of socioeconomic diversity. And with one glance at this crowd of suburban Avril Lavigne imposters, it's tempting to reduce the entire camp to a summertime diversion for the kids who don't make it onto "American Idol."

But listen to the music they've created and it'll change your mind: Some of these kids are remarkably talented. Some of the songs they've written could be - with a little more practice time and some grown-up touches - radio-ready. But, perhaps more important, all of these kids are passionate about music.

"We wake up at 7:30 and play music for 10 to 12 hours every day. It's not all fun. It's like, if we just wanted to be lazy, we'd stay at home and sleep in," says Amelia Koebel, 16, a keyboarder and vocalist from Campbell River, B.C. Her PCA band, the Japanese Accountants, wrote a catchy rock ballad - a love child of the Beatles' "Hey Jude" and something by Death Cab for Cutie.

In their spare time at camp - mostly late at night - the kids sometimes work on "side projects," which range from esoteric to silly. A few kids are writing acoustic guitar covers of "hardcore gangster rap songs" by Ludacris and 50 Cent. Brown and Danielle Estein, 18, are working on an original a capella number, in a style they call "Renaissance Jazz."

ROCK 'N' ROLL ROLE

During a Thursday afternoon seminar titled "How to Tour," the kids slumped in white metal chairs and listened to camp director Brian Moss enumerate the comedic prototypes present in every band: the prima donna, the crybaby, the egomaniac. The kids laughed and related - they each had a prima donna and a crybaby in their band, too.

Afterward, as everyone filed back to their practice rooms, they talked about why they've come to PCA. Some said it's because music is an escape. It's the only way they can get away from their families, their boyfriends or girlfriends, or the angst and burdens of being a teenager.

Others flipped their hair, rearranged their bandanas and laughed - "I do it for the fun of it, I guess," says Emii Pahl, 13, of Medford, Ore., who wore earrings made of guitar picks.

Brown, the charismatic lead singer from PLAID, says that PCA is more than just a summer camp. It's the opportunity to meet people outside of his little hometown of Welches, Ore. "It's my only connection to the wider world of rock 'n' roll," he says.

Brown wanted to come to PCA so badly, he hitched a ride in a friend's sister's car. As of last Thursday, he wasn't sure how he'd get home on Saturday.

"Music is the biggest thing in my life," he says. He's a thoughtful boy with green glass earrings that hang, snakelike into his tousled brown hair. "Music is powerful. It has the ability to move things - literally, to move people."

When PCA ends, and after PLAID breaks up for good, Brown plans to spend the rest of his summer before junior year working a catering job and practicing his guitar in a homemade sound studio, where mattresses line the walls.

"Have you ever listened to a song and just fallen into it? Like the intensity becomes so unbearable, you can't even move?" His deep-brown eyes are searching. For a moment, he's the perfect image of the brooding young rock star, all grit and passion.

"I want to find that thing, to find what it is about music that moves us," he says.

So what is it? Where is he going to look?

"I don't know. I mean, I'm only 16. I have a lot more living to do," he says. "But I'll find it. One day, I hope."

Then, somewhere behind him, a bandmate shouts a fart joke and everyone - this crowd of young musicians - laughs and heads off to play like rock stars on a warm summer afternoon.

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