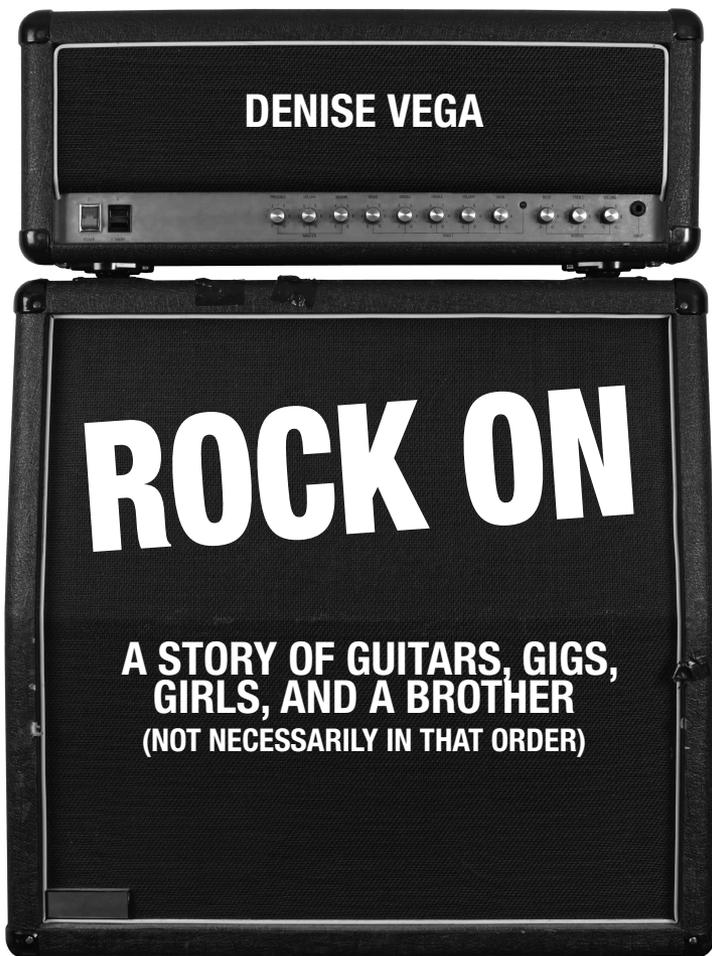


LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON

Ain't
^
There's nothin' better

Than a sweet guitar

And the music

rolls through

That ~~comes out of~~ it
^

And the place that it takes me

Far away, but still like coming home

Sometimes I don't want to come back

[chorus]

COLORADO ROCKS



We are an up-and-coming band, nameless but open to suggestions. Feel free to post your band name ideas on our blog. (We don't want to use one of those band name generators — we want it to come from you or us.)

WANTED

Bass guitar player.
If you're interested,
[contact](#) us about
audition times.

Countdown to
BATTLE OF
THE BANDS:

152

days

BAND NAME: to be named later

[PROFILE](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [PIX & VIDS](#) | [ABOUT/FAQ](#) | [CONTACT](#) | [BLOG](#)

BAND MEMBERS



Orion Taylor, lead guitar, lead vocals



Troy Baines, second guitar, backup vocals



Nick Brewster, drums and percussion

UPCOMING GIGS

1/11 – 6 PM Mic Night Monday at the
FX Lounge, LoDo

4/10 – 3 PM Matt's Sports,
Centennial

6/5 – Battle of the High School Bands,
Nicholson Sports Complex, Denver

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Monday, January 4

So in this blog, you'll hear from me (Nick), Orion, Troy, or Alli (aka A. Wilcox, our webqueen, as she calls herself), or maybe all of us. We'll try to keep you up to date on the latest and greatest.

ORION: I'm not sure who we're talking to, since we've had this profile up for over a month and hardly anyone has found it. But to the two people who might read this, you should know that we are gearing up for the Battle of the High School Bands. We couldn't do it last year, because we didn't have our band together enough, but this year we're ready. Or we will be. The Battle is BIG. It's HUGE. A good showing at the Battle could mean we move out of my garage (aka OT Studios) and into some serious venues.

NICK: That's right. The countdown to the Battle begins NOW. Some past Battle winners have gone on to record and tour, and that could be us. We want it to be us. It SHOULD be us!

TROY: Indeed it will be us. But first we are going to rock FX Lounge next Monday, so everyone should come check us out. And I predict that soon there will be tons of people commenting on this blog.

ALLI: And they totally need a band name because they can't go into Battle without one. Well, they can but they don't want to, so help them out here.

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ORION: And we need a bass player to go into Battle. Pronto.



DominantSpecies

I have no idea who you guys are, but you sound like losers. Hey, how's that for a band name?



PurpleGrrl

One of my Facebook friends told me about you guys. I listened to the download you have, and it's really good. When will you put up the whole song?

Band name suggestions: Arrowhead, Clocked Up, Buffalo Ridge, Mangled Sweater

YOU sound like a loser, DominantSpecies. Go away.



DragonBreath

Hey, Troy, my man! Cool profile, dude. I'll be there next week. Names: Mordor, Natural Enemy, DunderHeads



Halyn

Hey. This site came up in a search on poetry, but I might stick around cuz I like music and it's cool that you are doing this Battle thing.

I agree with PurpleGrrl. I hope DominantSpecies stays away.

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BAND NAME: to be named later

PROFILE

MUSIC

PIX & VIDS

ABOUT/FAQ

CONTACT

BLOG



BoyMagnet

I was doing a report on the constellations and this site came up. But I love music and Orion is cute on the Pix & Vids page. I'm in Denver so I'm hoping I can come to FX.

Names: Magnetize, Magnetic Connection, Magnetism



ONE

My dad likes to joke that the first word I ever spoke was *guitar*, but apparently it was *Del*.

Not *Mama* or *Dada*, like most kids, but the name of my older brother.

I used to think that was cool. Because Del was cool. Sure, we had the usual brother stuff with shoving, hitting, and his yelling at me to stop following him and his friends to the tree fort, but it was Del who rescued me from Curtis Langford when he shoved my head into a bucket of muddy water and held it there when I was six, Del who told everyone at our elementary school I was going to grow up to be a rock star, Del who took me out to Chipotle the day he got his license before he went to show off to his friends.

The same Del who, just yesterday, told me he probably wouldn't be at my first official gig, even though he'd known about it for weeks and had been really pumped about it.

“I put the word out,” he’d said back when I first told him about it. “Lots of people should be there. And we’ll have a big party after, even if it *is* a school night.” I’d thought that was so great because I knew he could charm my parents into agreeing.

But now he wasn’t even interested in coming to listen to us, let alone arrange some stupid party. It was like everything before he quit college never existed—the times we hung out together or when I went to his games or he bragged about my playing. That brother was gone, and in his place was a guy who looked at me like I was an idiot for even playing the guitar and made fun of me for trying to make it as a musician.

I shook my head hard, trying to get rid of thoughts of Del so I could focus, get myself to another place, the place I would need to be if I wanted to pull off this gig. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

It took just a few seconds before I could almost hear the shouts and whistles, the applause, practically smell the fake smoke rising on the stage at Red Rocks Amphitheatre as . . .

I look out over the crowd, framed by massive walls of red rock jutting into the night sky.

I stroke my sleek black Les Paul, then slam into a killer riff that sends every girl in the front row screaming for a piece of me. The sound reverberates off the rocks that surround the seats, natural acoustics for our music. The music is pure and perfect; record execs will be knocking over one another after the show to sign us.

I look out on the crowd, my voice hitting all the notes. I—

“Ori?”

—look back at my best friend and drummer, Nick “Call Me the Brew Man” Brewster, and—

“Ori. Dude. You’ve got to come out now. We’re going on soon.”

I blinked once. Twice.

The Red Rocks stage dissolved. I wasn’t a rock star. I was a sixteen-year-old dork in a dingy bathroom stall, staring at the F-word scratched into the door in all its glorious forms. It took me a second to remember that we were at the FX Lounge on Mic Night Monday for our first official public appearance.

And I was hiding in the bathroom.

“Give me a minute.”

“We’ve already given you ten,” Nick said. “Come on.”

I hesitated.

“Don’t make me crawl under this door, dude. The floor is disgusting.”

“But we don’t even have a name,” I said. “Or a bass player.”

“We’ll get those things.” Nick thumped the metal door. “Dude, how are you going to play at the Battle with hundreds of people watching if you can’t even get out there in front of a few dozen who are mostly friends and family?”

The Battle. Our ticket to getting noticed, to building our career as a band.

But it was safe in here.

The Battle. Our shot at doing what we loved, at making and playing music that other people would listen to.

Okay, so it smelled a little. But it was quiet.

The Battle. Something we couldn’t go into cold, never having played anywhere but in the garage or at my sister’s birthday party.

Dang.

The Battle. The only thing that would get me out of this stall.

And Nick, of course, knew that.

I unlatched the lock and opened the door.

Nick grabbed my arm, shaking his head as he led me out of the bathroom. “All you need to do is get your hands on your guitar and you’ll be fine.”

“It’s not mine,” I said. Which was true. I’d borrowed the electric guitar that sat out there waiting for me. It wasn’t the Les Paul, the only guitar I’d ever pictured myself playing at the Battle of the Bands.

“Taylor, dude, you’re killing me. Get your butt out there, pick up that guitar, and do your thing.” He gave me a shove.

“Thank God,” Troy said as I stepped out onto the stage, which wasn’t really a stage at all, just a cleared-out area in one corner of the bar. “I was afraid we’d lost you, man.” He smacked me on the arm, genuinely relieved and happy to see me, not annoyed at all. But that was Troy.

Next to him was Alli, who was not only his girlfriend but also our band chronicler via video and Internet, my next-door neighbor, and one of my best friends since our moms shoved us together for a bunch of playgroups and such. Back in seventh grade we tried to kiss, totally messed it up with braces snagging and overall weirdness, and agreed we did *not* belong together — except as friends.

“All you need to do is pick up that guitar,” she said, pointing to it.

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” I swallowed and

stepped closer to the loaner, a decent Fender Stratocaster that belonged to one of my guitar mentors. I had several who Ed Gold had turned me on to, guys who taught me jazz, classical, rock, blues, and more.

Sucking in a breath, I tried to calm myself as I looked around, the smell of beer mixed with greasy fries wafting toward me.

No girls in the front row ready to scream for a piece of me—luckily, because even though one of my best friends was a girl and I had a sister, girls scared the heck out of me as a general rule. So it was probably a good thing that there weren't any nearby.

And no record execs, just a clump of adults—our parents—sitting at a table, completely ignoring us as they talked and sipped their drinks. To their right was a table full of eighth-grade girls trying to look mature and cool, headed by my sister, Vela.

“Here comes our biggest fan base, thanks to Troy.” Alli put her arm through his as we all looked toward the door. It was Troy's crew spilling in, spreading out over the front tables, leaning up against the walls, talking, texting, occasionally glancing our way. They would be half the audience, which was great because we needed as many friendly faces as we could get. Especially since all the people Del would have brought weren't here because Del wasn't here.

“I'm going to hand out our website cards before we start,” Nick said. Then he looked at Troy. “Make sure he doesn't go anywhere.”

I rolled my eyes, trying to ignore the sudden urge to flee again. These people were looking for some real music and

were about to get *us*. True, most of them were our family and friends, but there were a few unknowns and they didn't seem like they had stumbled in here accidentally.

Holy crap.

We weren't rehearsing in my garage, or playing for Vela's thirteenth-birthday party. This wasn't a crowd I could imagine, one that did exactly what I wanted it to do at any given moment.

These were real, live, unpredictable people.

Unpredictable.

Like Del. I glanced around the room, my gaze stopping near the door, then back at the far corner. For a moment I thought I saw him, and my heart sped up.

"He's not here," Alli said quietly before pulling her video camera out of her bag. "I checked. I'm sorry."

"Whatever," I said, turning abruptly back to the "stage." I felt disappointed and relieved at the same time. Mostly relieved, because I never knew these days whether Del would be Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde, and I didn't need that stress at our first official gig.

Alli smiled sympathetically. Part of me wished she didn't know so much about me, but most of me was glad she got it. Got me. Like she always had.

"You're going to rock the house." She squeezed my arm and smiled as Nick strode up, all grins.

"I gave away all the cards," he said. "I think we'll have more people visiting our site, not just a few who found it by accident."

"If we play, they will come," said Troy, ever the optimist.

I hoped he was right. It would help to have some real fans who could spread the word about us and our music. And it would be great to have that support at the Battle.

“Okay, boys.” Charlie, the FX manager, walked over to us. “You’ve got thirty minutes to play, then there’s a break and you clear out so I can bring on the next band. Got it?”

“Yep.” Nick’s eyes dared me to contradict him.

I frowned, then glanced at the loaner guitar. The strings were taut and finely tuned, just waiting for me to run my fingers up and down the frets.

Waiting.

The moment my hand curled around the neck, calm fell over me. I pulled the strap over my head and adjusted the guitar against my body. The room around me began to disappear, the bar sounds receding into nothing. Sucking in a deep breath, I looked back at Nick and nodded.

He grinned, relieved.

“Hey, everyone,” Charlie said to a screech of feedback. “Thanks for coming out for Mic Night Monday at the FX Lounge, where we’ve also got Two-for-One Tuesdays, Ladies’ Night on Wednesdays, and live music every Friday and Saturday night.” He rubbed his hands together. “We’re excited to showcase some high school bands tonight. Keep eating, keep drinking, and put your hands together for—” He turned to look at me. “What’s your name again, son?”

“Orion,” I said automatically.

“No!” Nick said, standing up from behind his drums, brandishing one of his sticks. “That’s not our *band* name! That’s *his* name.”

But Charlie was already back at the mic, clapping his hands. “Okay, everyone. Give it up for Orion!”

Nick, still scowling, nodded to the mic in front of me. He had this crazy idea that since I was lead guitar and lead vocalist, I should be the one talking to the audience even though I’m not much of a talker.

But his glare shoved me up to the mic. “Um, I’m Orion Taylor.” My voice cracked and several people laughed. Before I could get embarrassed, Alli was giving me a thumbs-up from the side, her video camera rolling, so I took a breath and continued. “And that’s Troy Baines”—an eruption of screams, Troy’s crew giving him his due—“on second guitar and backup vocals, and that’s Nick Brewster on drums. You should be familiar with this first one, so . . .”

I knew Boston’s “More Than a Feeling” would bring the old people (our parents) and people who’d learned about the oldies on the now-defunct *Guitar Hero* (everyone else) to their feet, and I was right. I’d only played the first few chords when the crowd erupted in screams and shouts. I was glad Charlie had darkened the room so I couldn’t see my mom making a complete fool of herself dancing in the back, singing along like she always did when she heard “her” songs.

I stepped up to the mic and sang, Troy and Nick doing their thing. . . .

And then I was gone, catapulting outside of myself, to that place the music took me so hard and fast I couldn’t do anything but go along for the ride. I was teetering on the edge, at the top of the roller coaster, hovering for a second before crashing down, feeling the rush as I flew across the rails.

The last few notes from our guitars reverberated as Nick smashed his way through a made-up drum solo to end the song. Troy and I bobbed our heads up and down in time to the beat, finishing with the necks of our guitars thrust upward.

The screaming, the applause—whoa. I came back to Earth to see girls clapping and cheering for us. Not quite wanting a piece of me, but definitely getting into the song.

“Thank you!” I said into the mic. We played our second cover and got the same reaction. I could see Charlie out of the corner of my eye, nodding approval at the crowd. We played one more cover, and then it was time for our first original song—“Knock It Down, Bring It Up”—my feeble attempt at a danceable rock song with lyrics like “Knock it down, bring it up, rock it off the top, and flip it, yeah, baby, flip until you drop.” Not exactly award-winning, but it was catchy and my sister’s little middle school friends liked it.

“Knock It Down, Bring It Up” kept people on their feet, and they stayed up for our next tune, “Finals Week.”

We were on a roll and the crowd was totally with us. We had two more songs—one that was more of a ballad, and then we’d wrap it up with what we hoped would become our signature song, “Suburban Nightmare”—Alli was even creating a cool multimedia presentation to play behind us when we got big.

But first up was the ballad.

“We’re going to slow things down a little,” I said into the mic, wiping the sweat from my forehead. I could hear the murmurs of people talking, the sound of forks and glasses

clinking as I set down the loaner electric and picked up my acoustic. I pulled in the stool we'd had off to the side, plugging the guitar into the amp. Troy and Nick went silent behind me—they didn't play in this one. It was all me.

"This is a song I wrote called 'Waiting for You.'"

One of the great things about being a musician is you can say things through your music that you would never say normally. Somehow, when you're a guy singing about feelings, you're cool. If I were just telling them to someone, he'd call me a wuss or smack me upside the head.

My songs were the only place I could say this kind of stuff, so I did. But this was the first time I was actually going to do it in public, so I was definitely nervous.

The first few chords were sweet and clear, pulling me in. I closed my eyes, letting the music flow through me.

*I'm always alone
Even in a crowd
The voices soft
But mostly loud
... around me
I always felt
There was someone for me
I was waiting
And so was she
... somewhere*

A few shouts and whistles rose up from the crowd, but mostly people were quiet, listening. The chords echoed through

my body, and I started the second verse feeling more confident, so I took a chance, looking out into the crowd. . . .

And saw him.

Del was leaning against the bar, his face illuminated by the neon beer signs, grinning at the bartender, who was smiling and nodding like he and Del were old buddies. Then Del turned back, smirking at me.

Just a smirk, a small facial expression. That was all.

But that was all it took.

My fingers fumbled over the strings, an off-key note whining from the guitar, a wounded animal that needed to be put out of its misery. People cringed.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My mind was blank. I stared at the floor, as if the words to a song I'd played a hundred times would suddenly rise up and show themselves.

"I'd seen someone," hissed Troy.

I'd seen someone. I'd seen someone. It sounded familiar. But what came next?

"I'd seen someone," I whispered into the mic. Another laugh. Chairs scraping, front-row eyes dropping in embarrassment.

I sat there, frozen, for several more seconds. Then Charlie was beside me, grabbing the mic and extending it upward. He covered it with his hand and looked back at me.

"Some nights you got it, some nights you don't," he said. Then he faced front. "Let's hear it for Orion! The next band will be up in thirty minutes. Get yourself another drink, another basket of fries. Stay close and stay tuned." He flicked off the mic. "You boys have twenty minutes to clear the stage for the Pissant Pirates."



TWO

I was heading toward the side door with my guitars when I was knocked from behind.

“I am *so* sorry!”

“S okay,” I said, eyes averted. I was in no mood to look at anyone who’d witnessed the Choke, especially a girl. But I could feel her looking at me, eyes locked on my face.

“Oh my God,” she murmured before ducking down the hall toward the restrooms.

I got that reaction from a lot of girls. And I hadn’t even had time to jump into my usual there’s-a-potentially-cute-girl-nearby panic, which transformed me into either a blathering idiot or a frozen mute. This one had lunged away from me upon first sight. It might have been a record. Maybe I should have given her a trophy.

Pushing the door open with my shoulder, I sucked in the

cold January night air, letting it hurt my lungs. It felt good to be outside, leaving the Pissants, my screwup, and the girl I'd repulsed behind the solid metal door.

We all loaded Nick's drum set into the Brewsters' truck. My parents were helping me put my guitars and amp in the trunk of their car when Vela and her friends came around the side of the building.

"You were a rock star, Ori," Vela said, grinning as she gave me a hug. "Except when you messed up."

"Thanks, Vee. Appreciate that."

"I loved that last song you were singing," her friend Jacqueline said. "It was amazing."

"It's true," Alli said as Troy slipped his arm around her shoulders. "If you could have seen their faces..."

Before hung in the air, unspoken. It was quiet—one of those awkward-moment kinds of quiet when everyone's remembering the thing you want everyone to forget.

Then Jacqueline spoke again. "So does she walk in? Later in the song, I mean. Does the girl show up and you get together and everything?"

The other girls nodded, eyes on me. Gotta love eighth-grade groupies.

"Something like that," I said, feeling a little better that they, at least, didn't think I was a total loser. "I'll play it again sometime. All the way through."

"Cool," Jacqueline said.

"You were great." My dad clapped me on the shoulder. "These things happen."

I scowled. “Can we just stop talking about it?”

“Did you see Del?” Vela asked, tugging at my sleeve. “Wasn’t it great that he came?”

Yeah, great. Seeing Del was what caused the Choke.

“Must’ve missed him,” I said quickly, then turned to Nick. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I thought you wanted to listen to our competition,” he said. “The Pissant Pirates are in the Battle, too, you know.”

I frowned. The last thing I wanted to do was go back in there and stand next to the people who had just witnessed my humiliation.

“I’m done,” I said. “You guys go.”

They exchanged looks, but I didn’t care. I had to get out of there.

“Oh.” My mom frowned. “We thought you were coming home later with Troy. We don’t have room in our car for you with Vela and all her friends.”

And Nick’s dad had already taken off with his equipment.

I was even a failure at being a failure, unable to run away with my tail between my legs.

“I’ll be down the street at that burger place,” I said to Alli. “Text me when you’re leaving.” Without waiting for anyone to respond, I took off down the sidewalk. A few seconds later, I heard footsteps hurrying behind me, like someone was trying to catch up. I picked up my pace, picturing a heckler, or worse — Del.

“Orion Taylor?” The woman’s voice was firm but nice. I stopped and turned around. She strode toward me, sticking her hand out when she got closer.

“Courtney Calavera, online music critic for *DMS*—
Denver Music Scene.”

“I know *DMS*,” I said, taking her hand.

“And I know you,” she said. “Lead guitarist, lead singer, lyricist of a band with no name, and possible music prodigy.”

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“I talked to your parents.”

“Great.” Hopefully my mom hadn’t mentioned the time I used Alli’s Fisher-Price karaoke player to practice my singing.

“Don’t worry,” Courtney said. “I won’t use the karaoke thing in my piece.”

Wonderful.

“I just had a few questions to round things out,” she said. “Can we talk?”

“I’d rather not.” I yanked open the door to the restaurant and stepped inside, assaulted by the heavy scent of sizzling burgers and french fries. Courtney Calavera followed.

“Look,” she said. “Everyone messes up at least once during their career. You’re lucky you got it out of the way early, when it doesn’t count.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I stepped up to the counter and placed my order, tugging a few wadded bills from my pocket.

“Well, it should. I’ve seen major acts bite it big-time during a performance. You just keep going.”

I didn’t say anything. Just paid and waited. When my food came, Courtney was still there.

“You really don’t want to talk, do you?”

I shook my head.

“Okay. I’ll see if I can catch one of the other band members. In the meantime, here’s my card.” She held it out to me. “Call if you change your mind. My deadline’s tomorrow at five.”

I sat down at the table farthest from the windows and ate, even though I wasn’t hungry.

Ten minutes later, Alli sent me a text: ☒ NO COMPETITION. WE’RE LEAVING. MEET US @ THE CAR.

I stuffed the last of the french fries in my mouth and headed out the door. I was almost to Troy’s car when I saw him. Del was at the corner just a few yards away, leaning against the car that was supposed to be mine after he went to college, that I’d gotten to drive for a whopping five weeks after getting my license in November, before he had screwed up, come home, and taken it over because he needed it for work. It really sucked that my parents had agreed to this, basically rewarding him for blowing it while I had to ride my bike or bum rides off my friends.

And what was he doing hanging around? He’d told me he wasn’t coming—like he had better things to do than be at his brother’s first real gig—and then he was there, smirking, making me choke, staying after to see his handiwork.

My steps slowed. Maybe if I took long enough, he’d go away.

I was getting closer and he wasn’t moving. He was looking over his shoulder, waving as a girl came around the corner smiling at him, a girl I recognized, a girl who spun me back to last year, when I was a freshman and she was a sophomore....



Freshman year. Del 17, Ori 14. Ori had taken the long way around to geometry again, hoping to catch sight of Amber Greer. This time he was going to say more than hi to her. He was going to ask her about her new car. He knew she'd turned sixteen and just gotten her license.

As he turned the corner, he saw her with a group of friends near her locker. He took a breath, gathering his courage.

"Hey, Amber."

"Hey." She barely glanced at him.

One of her friends whispered something in her ear, and she turned to look, her face flushed. Ori followed their gazes to his brother.

"Hi, Del," Amber said.

"Hey," Del said, glancing from her to Ori, then back to her. "Did you know Ori's in a band?" He stepped behind Ori and clapped a hand on his shoulder, forcing Amber to look at him. "You should check them out. They are smokin'. They're going to be playing some gigs soon. When's your first one?" He looked at Ori.

So did everyone else.

"Um." There wasn't a gig. There wasn't even a band yet. Ori and his friends had just started talking about it.

"Soon," Del said, smacking his shoulder again. "Ask Ori about it sometime, okay?" He looked right at Amber.

"Sure," Amber said, her eyes on Del.

Del didn't look back at her. "Any of you seen Tara?"

Amber shook her head, clearly disappointed that Del had mentioned his girlfriend.

"I think she's near the gym," Ori said.

"Thanks, buddy." He punched Ori's arm, their eyes locking briefly—Ori's saying "thanks," Del's saying "no sweat, bro."



My feet dragged me closer to Del and the girl he had his arm around—Amber Greer. She was kissing Del's chin, her chest pushing against his bicep. Goody for her. She finally got the Taylor brother she wanted. At least for a little while. Del was pretty fickle with girls these days.

Okay, maybe he'll be in a good mood. Maybe it will be fine.

I took a breath and forced a smile.

"Hey, Del," I said. "Thanks for coming out."

"Wouldn't miss it, little bro," he said. "Nice work." He smiled his lopsided, engaging Del smile, smacking my arm. I let myself relax.

"It was amazing," Amber said, and she looked like she meant it.

"Well, except for . . . you know." Del chuckled.

And just like that it was as if all those looks and comments of the last several weeks were wiped away and the old Del stood in front of me, laughing and joking.

"I know," I said, shaking my head. "I don't know what happened during that song. I've played it a million times." No way was I going to say that seeing him had goofed me up.

"Yeah, I've heard you." He smiled over at Amber. "He

plays constantly.” He looked at me. “But you can’t be perfect all the time. It’s cool.”

Del thought it was okay, that I was okay.

“That song,” Amber said, stepping a little away from Del. “It was so beautiful. It really got to me.” She smiled and our eyes locked. “I’d love to hear the whole thing sometime.”

Del reached out and grabbed her arm, forcing her back to him. “Let’s go get something to eat,” he said to her. “You and me.”

“Great!” Her full attention was back on Del.

“Orion?”

I turned to see Courtney Calavera standing beside me.

“Just wanted to remind you about my deadline at five tomorrow. Call, e-mail, text—whatever—if you change your mind and want to talk.”

“Who was that?” Del asked after she’d left.

“Just some reporter for an online thing,” I said. I was about to ask if he wanted to hang out later, play some video games, when he grinned at Amber.

“Reporters called me all the time,” Del told her. “Especially after we won state and I was voted MVP. Phone rang off the *hook*.”

“I’m sure,” Amber said. “That game was so awesome!”

“You were there?”

She nodded, then looked at me. “You’ll play that song for me sometime, won’t you, Ori?”

“Sure he will,” Nick said, coming to stand beside me. “Hey, Del.”

Del didn’t answer, didn’t seem to notice him. He raised

an eyebrow at me, then nudged Amber gently down the sidewalk, away from us.

“Don’t sweat it, man,” Nick said as we headed to Troy’s car. “She’ll come around to the real Taylor brother. She’s totally into your song.”

“Right.” I climbed into the backseat, looking straight ahead as we pulled away from the curb. Troy flipped on the radio as Alli started talking to him, her hand resting on his arm.

Nick shook his head. “I have so many memories of the three of us—you, me, Del. *Good* memories. I mean, it wasn’t like you guys totally got along or whatever. He pushed you around some and was a jerk sometimes. But he was cool most of the time, you know?” He looked over his shoulder, as if he could see the old Del back there on the sidewalk. “It’s like—what happened? Did an alien replace him?”

I snorted. Easier to accept that than the truth.

That ever since he’d screwed up his first semester of college, my brother had started to hate me.

Mic Night Monday at FX: A Mix of Talent and “Don’t Quit School”

by Courtney Calavera, *DMS* reporter

Many of us have been big fans of Mic Night Monday at the FX Lounge. A few bands that started out there have gone on to play at larger venues, and it’s always fun to see new talent.

Last night was a mix of pretty good, okay, and “don’t quit your day job” — or “don’t quit school,” as was the case here, because FX was showcasing high school talent this month.

The first band was introduced as Orion, but there was a bit of a question as to whether this was their actual band name, since it’s also the name of the lead singer and guitarist.

They started out with two decent covers, lead Orion Taylor able to hit all the right notes. Nick Brewster kept up the rhythm on drums, smacking out a solo that the audience really got into. Their first original was a rock-pop tune called “Knock It Down, Bring It Up” — a little too Daughtry for my taste, but the crowd ate it up (though I gathered a good percentage of the crowd were family and friends of this group).

“Finals Week” had a good beat, and Taylor and Troy Baines on second guitar knocked out a killer riff in the middle.

Then they slowed things down with “Waiting for You.” Unfortunately, Taylor lost his concentration partway through and couldn’t recover. Too bad. It had the makings of a nice ballad, with a classic sound and decent lyrics. The band exited early, leaving most of us wanting more, which is a good thing.

The Pissant Pirates came on next, lead singer Dave Carson screeching out their first cover — “Walk This Way” by Aerosmith — and strutting back and forth in the small space like a Steven Tyler wannabe. Not even close, Carson baby.

[click here for full story](#)



We are an up-and-coming band, nameless but open to suggestions. Feel free to post your band name ideas on our blog. (We don't want to use one of those band name generators — we want it to come from you or us.)

WANTED

Bass guitar player. If you're interested, [contact](#) us about audition times.

Countdown to
BATTLE OF
THE BANDS:

144

days

BAND NAME: to be named later

[PROFILE](#)

[MUSIC](#)

[PIX & VIDS](#)

[ABOUT/FAQ](#)

[CONTACT](#)

[BLOG](#)

Tuesday, January 12

NICK: Yeah, so we had a little hiccup at FX last night, but so what? It happens to the best of them. BTW, thanks for the band name suggestions. We'll put them in the mix and see if we can ever agree on one. You know I'm picky. (I still can't believe I was outvoted on Nick's Stix and Drummurd — that's *drum* spelled forward and backward. I thought it was cool, but no one else did.)

ORION: That whole choke experience at FX inspired a new song I'm calling "Focus" — art can often come from pain and extreme humiliation, eh? The song's about powering through even when you have stuff pulling you in different directions. You've got to keep your focus, eyes on the prize, that kind of thing. Don't know if it will be ready for Matt's Sports in April, but we'll see.

TROY: We'll be checking out some local bands at the Grog and other places in the next couple of weeks, so maybe we'll see some of you there.

BASS AUDITIONS FEBRUARY 5! Get your name in by January 29 so we have you on the list!

COLORADO ROCKS



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DominantSpecies

I repeat: How about calling your band the Losers? I heard you play at the FX, and you suck! Pissant Pirates shoulda got an oncore.



PurpleGrrl

Sorry I missed your big debut. I'm sure you were great! BTW, DominantSpecies, it's *encore* not *oncore*, you idiot. And why are you back?



DragonBreath

DS needs to take a chill pill. You all ROCK.



Halyn

Obviously, DominantSpecies is either one of the Pissant Pirates or a deluded fan. I was @ FX, and the Pissants SUCKED. That guy can't sing at all.

Cool that you can take something painful and turn it into a song. I do that too in my poetry. It's such a great release, like when something bad happens you can get it down and it's like you've gotten rid of it.



BoyMagnet

Orion is pretty cute in person! I'm planning to go to their gig at Matt's Sports. Who else is?



PurpleGrrl

Hey, BoyMagnet, aren't you a little full of yourself? And the best you can do is a magnet avatar? Makes me think you really aren't a boy magnet or you'd show some of your stuff.

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BTW, I'll be at Matt's in April. Look for me. I'll be the one with the purple hair.



BoyMagnet

Purple hair is SO last decade. GMAB.

I'll be the one with the boys ALL OVER HER, including Orion.



Halyn

Take this offline, girls. This is supposed to be about the music.



BoyMagnet

Then why are you talking about your — snore — poetry?



THREE

Since the FX gig, I'd seen Del only in passing until Wednesday, when Mom brought in a box of stuff she was getting rid of, including an old baseball. I decided to try to be nice.

"Remember when we threw this through the Davises' window?" I asked, pulling the baseball out of the box.

He laughed. "And we both had to work it off cleaning their other windows, and they had, like, a hundred of them that hadn't been cleaned since the turn of the century." He tore open a new bag of potato chips, spilling a few out onto the counter.

"Oh geez, that's right." I smiled and grabbed a few chips. "Remember how pissed Mrs. Davis got when you wrote messages to me in the dirt on the windows? 'Please clean me. I'm disgusting.' 'Help me, I'm melting.'"

"Young man," Del said, doing a perfect imitation of Mrs. Davis, "'you do not make fun of someone you've harmed. I'll speak to your mother about this.'"

My mom chuckled.

“Did she?” I asked her.

“Probably,” she said. “I don’t remember that specifically. I do remember our discussion about the window cleaning as repayment.”

“It took *forever*,” Del said. “I’ve got to believe we paid for about ten windows, not one.”

“It would have been faster if you hadn’t used so much soap,” I said. “It took twice as long to rinse it off.”

He laughed as Vela walked in carrying our mom’s laptop.

“Check this out,” she said. “Ori’s famous!” She turned the screen toward us, displaying the *Denver Music Scene* article.

“How wonderful!” Mom gave me a sideways hug as she read the screen. “She’s really got some good things to say about you and the band.”

“No one even reads those online reviews,” Del said. He hadn’t even looked at the computer, the review.

And just like that, the moment was gone. And so were Del and the chips.

“Why’d you have to bring that out here?” I asked Vela.

“Sorry,” she said, looking hurt. “I thought you’d be excited.”

“I am,” I said. “It’s just . . .” I looked back the way Del had gone.

“Oh,” Vela said, getting it. “I didn’t think about that.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Mom said. “He’s a big boy.” She touched my arm. “Celebrate your success. He’ll come around.”

I grunted. Del was right. No one read those online reviews. There were a zillion sites like those, and who really

looked at them? What was so great about it? It wasn't like I'd scored the winning goal in the state lacrosse championship and gotten a partial scholarship to the University of Northern Colorado, like he had.

Still, it would have been nice for him to be happy for me, even if it was just a stupid online review.

I spent the next two days working on "Focus," finally getting enough of it together that it was actually a song. I was trying to get all the way through it one afternoon in the basement, my right hand flying over the strings, my left hand running over the fret like it had a life of its own when—

Snap.

The *thwang* of the off chord made me cringe as a string popped off its peg, flinging itself back toward me like the line on a fishing rod.

I set my guitar down and opened the case, flipping through bags of strings.

Every size but the one I needed.

Groaning, I grabbed my guitar and headed up the stairs, hesitating in front of the kitchen doorway.

"You carry that thing with you everywhere," Del said, motioning to the guitar I gripped in my hand. "Is it, like, your girlfriend?"

I frowned. "I broke a string."

"Why do you have to bring the whole guitar with you?"

I bit my lip, mumbling.

"What?"

"Nothing."

He snorted. “Let me guess. The screwup could never understand the tortured artist.”

“You’re not a screwup.”

“But you’re a tortured artist.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“‘I didn’t say that,’” he mimicked in falsetto. “You’re such a girl.”

My shoulders tensed. *Let it go.*

He rolled his eyes and walked out, not offering to give me a ride, which was fine by me. Being in an enclosed space for an extended period of time with my brother was the closest thing to hell I could imagine, at least these days. Weird how a few short months could change everything. Before he went to college, he drove me just about everywhere I needed to go and didn’t seem to mind. We’d laugh at stupid things and I’d watch him work his magic with girls. The Del Spell, I used to call it in my head, feeling like a little was cast over my average-lookingness when I was with him.

But that was before.

I heard the Honda peel off down the street, leaving me with my only other mode of transportation: my bike.

I headed down the hall to the garage, stopping to stare at the Ultralite Guitar Carrier—Del’s name for it—hanging from a hook near the back door. He had retrofitted one of his old rafting life vests about three years ago so I could strap my guitar to my back when I rode my bike. It wasn’t one of those bulky orange vests—this was a sleek gray and blue Extra-sport Riptide. (*Riptide*. Huh. Possibly good band name.) He’d taken the padding out of the front and added some

wide adjustable straps to the back so I could grow into it. I thought it was the coolest thing he'd ever done for me.

I hadn't worn it since he'd been back, but if I wanted to get a new string and finish the song I had no choice. Tugging it off the hook, I strapped my guitar to it, making sure it was secure. Then I slid it on slowly, wondering if it would feel different because *he* was different.

But it felt the same—just a little snuggler than the last time I'd had it on—and I couldn't figure out why that bothered me so much.

Gold's Guitars was the closest thing to heaven this side of the Rocky Mountains. It smelled like music—sheets of paper, wood, brass, metal, plastic, and more. The walls were covered with every guitar you could possibly imagine—Fenders and Gibsons, Martins, Rickenbackers, Yamahas, and, of course, Gibson Les Pauls—acoustic, electric, twelve-string, bass. You name it, Ed Gold had it. And if he didn't have it, he could get it for you. Which he was going to do for me when I'd saved enough for *the* Les Paul, one Ed didn't normally carry in his store.

Del had thought it was the baddest guitar ever when I showed it to him online last year.

"You're going to shred on that thing," he'd said.

Now he probably wasn't even thinking about it, couldn't care less whether I shredded or not. And why did I care if he cared?

Argh.

"OT, what's shaking?" Ed came out from behind the

counter, his brown ponytail bouncing against his neck. “You’re not on the schedule today.” I’d been coming into the store for years and had begged and begged Ed to hire me. He finally had when I turned fifteen, after talking to my parents. Over a year later, I could practically run the place myself, if I wanted to and Ed would let me.

“Hey, Ed.” I unsnapped the vest and brought it and my guitar carefully around front. “I need a string. I was right in the middle of a jam session and—”

“Say no more,” Ed said, striding over to a carousel where the guitar strings hung. “We’ll get you fixed up and playing in no time.” He flipped through the bags. “So I heard you started off strong at your gig.” He had wanted to come and cheer me on, along with all my guitar mentors, but I had asked them to wait. I knew I’d be way too nervous if they were out in the audience. It had been hard enough with just family and friends.

“Then you also heard I choked in the middle of ‘Waiting for You.’”

He shrugged. “When Rod Stewart sang for the first time with the Jeff Beck Group in 1968, he sang the first song while hiding behind some speakers.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “You got the first-gig jitters out of the way. It’s smooth sailing from now on.” He and Courtney Calavera must have been sharing brain waves.

I thought of Del. How I’d wanted him there and hadn’t wanted him there. And then he was there and when I’d seen him I’d blown it.

“I hope so.”

Ed jabbed the bag of strings toward the Jam Room—a nearly soundproof room he had added last year where people could play as loud as they wanted and not disturb other customers. “Have at it.” Of course he would know I had to finish the song I’d been playing when my string broke. And I had to do it on the guitar I’d been playing it on because it was all about the sound I had already created, the sound that still echoed in my mind, waiting to reach its natural end. Ed got this, which was why he hadn’t said anything when I walked in with a guitar strapped across my back.

“Thanks, Ed,” I said as I took the string from him. When I got inside the Jam Room, I plugged my guitar into one of the amps. It didn’t take long to get myself right back where I was, teetering on the edge, ready to fly into oblivion. I backed off a few feet, thrumming my way along, hovering for a second before leaping skyward, feeling the rush as I flew over the clouds, around the sun, and across galaxies.

*Step back from me
You can't hold me in your grip
I've set myself free*

I strummed harder, strumming thoughts of Del right out of my mind until I reached the end, breathing heavily as I wiped my forehead with my shirt.

I was exhausted but euphoric, grinning from the sheer high of playing. I felt GREAT. Like I could do anything.

“Thanks, Ed!” I shouted as I strode by him, pushing out into the pale January sun as my breath swirled in front of me.

Swinging my leg over the bike seat, I felt ten feet tall. I put on my helmet and slipped on my shades—ever the cool band man. True, we had no name, and we didn't have a bass player, and we didn't know all of our songs yet, and there was a lot of competition for the Battle, but . . .

We would totally rock.

I felt so amazing as I pushed off down the street that when I saw a white Ford Taurus stopped at a light, with a blond girl wearing sunglasses looking my way, I didn't freak or look away like I usually did.

I looked right at her and kept looking, letting her see my coolness. This was how it would be onstage.

“Ori! Orion Taylor!” The girls scream my name, throwing articles of clothing on the stage. I pick them up and wave them in the air and the screams grow to a deafening shriek.

I am the Guitar Man.

I am the Rock Star.

I am—

Grinning like a maniac because the girl in the Taurus was still looking at me and I was still looking at her.

This rock band dude was definitely cool with the ladies.

This rock band dude just might talk to her if he decides to.

This rock band dude might—

Ride smack into a telephone pole.

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