

The Mold Remains Intact

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I wasn't special. I was sixteen years old, and it was the first day of the summer program at the Berklee School of Music in Boston, MA. I arrived to class early, took my brand new electric guitar (an American Deluxe Sunburst Fender Stratocaster with a maple neck) out of its case, and began to nonchalantly play a few of my most impressive licks. As my fellow classmates filed in around me, I barely looked up from my fingers. I wanted to send the clear message that I had no time to waste on these fly-over-state amateurs with their tasteless instruments. When the teacher finally entered, I reluctantly ceased my awe-inspiring display of virtuosity and gazed around the room. Surrounding me were 20 other skinny teenagers with shaggy brown hair, peach-fuzz mustaches, tight black jeans, Converse sneakers, stained t-shirts with obscure bands on the front, and of course, Fender Stratocasters. Oh, and we were all playing the same damn blues riff.

I may be slightly exaggerating the identical nature of my new "peers" and me, but the end result was a slap in the face to my carefully curated identity. As teenage citizens of Ojai, California (population 7,500), my friends and I did everything we could to create clear distinctions between us and the squares and jocks that populated our high school. Even though the members of our social circle put on fundamentally indistinguishable indie rock/stoner uniforms and aloof attitudes before getting dropped off at school by a progressive parent in a hybrid sedan, we liked to think of ourselves as a collection of true individuals. Needless to say, it was a bit unnerving to have my credential of being a complete original called into question on that first day.

When you unwillingly flip from a proud outsider to an insider in a matter of moments, you have two options: embrace the shared sense of identity, or find more creative ways to secure your status as a singular personality. After weighing my choices for

a few seconds, I decided it was time to distance myself from the phonies. Lacking the money for a new look, the logical step was to turn my guitar into a one-of-a-kind instrument that reflected the “real” me.

I’d only had the Stratocaster for a few months at that time, but it was clear to all that it was the love of my life. I’d tuck it into bed and lay its neck gently on my pillow so that I could trace my fingers around its curves and scrape my fingernails against its rough strings as I fell asleep. It was the first thing I’d see when I woke up, and as soon as I could kick the covers off of us, I’d start practicing an exotic new scale that I’d picked up from one of the countless guitar magazines that littered my floor. Studying it in my cramped Berklee dorm room, a thought occurred behind my greasy hair and pimples forehead: *as much as I love it, there’s no way I’m gonna let my guitar look like everyone else’s (or let it be better looking than me).*

Over the next hour or two, I feverishly disfigured the perfect glossy layers of paint that covered the body by hacking and scraping with a flat head screwdriver that I found on my roommate’s desk. I was in a full sweat by the time I finished, and my beloved Strat looked like it had just been run over by a truck on a gravel road. It was authentic. It was rock and roll. It was me. When I casually pulled it out in class the next day, no one seemed to notice the radical transformation. One kid asked me if it was a vintage guitar, then went back to his incessant noodling. I stopped going to class. “You can’t teach genius,” I told myself, and spent the rest of the summer honing my craft alone in a tiny practice room so full of weed smoke that I couldn’t see my fingers fumbling across the fretboard.

Being special means that you aren’t subject to the laws of cause and effect. You get to experience pleasure without pain, fame without disgrace, and gain without loss. You’ll

never get a life-threatening illness or be hit by a bus because you were placed on this planet to do great and lasting things. However, when you truly believe that every action you make, every song you write, and every thought in your head is vitally important, loneliness is par for the course. Deep interpersonal relationships are difficult to maintain when you view your peers as inferior, and when you believe that there is a finite amount of attainment available in the universe, their success comes at the cost of your failure.

Thankfully, the delusion that one is special rarely persists through adulthood. Ignoring the outliers who are emotionally neglected from infancy (therefor never feeling special), or those who have enough money and/or good looks to sustain the illusion of their uniqueness to their deathbeds, the myth of being special shatters at one of two times: during primary identity formation, or in the transition to young adulthood. Both scenarios carry distinct positive and negative psychological attributes. My childhood friends who were told that nothing they ever did was good enough were often afraid to try new things and had low self-esteem. On the other hand, some of them are experiencing success in their young-adult lives as a result of working tirelessly to prove their worth.

Others (like myself) have to dismantle the armor of their perceived superiority to the rest of the human race gradually; often over many years and through the method of being kicked in the teeth repeatedly by the steel-toed boot of reality. Arrogance dissipates only through the repeated experience of having friends, lovers, and societal institutions point out the discrepancies that exist between exalted self-conception and the ways one is actually perceived. While I've already touched on many of the negative ramifications of believing you're special, there's another result to having that notion instilled in you as a child: laziness.

Due to the conditioning I received from my parents and private-school teachers, the belief in my brilliance left little motivation for the humbling experience of learning from others. On the flip side, some positive characteristics came from being told I was exceptional. For one, I felt good about myself and assumed I could do anything I set my mind to. I tried new things and was resilient to most negativity from my classmates. Though I made it through middle school with good grades and an optimistic attitude towards life, teenagedom was lurking around the corner.

No one makes it out of their teenage years without a fair share of psychological and emotional wounds. While drugs and alcohol can take the edge off for a while, I found that no painkiller is as effective as unbridled egotism. Didn't get the girl? Fuck her, she'll be sorry when you're Someone and she's still bagging groceries. Barely passed the 11th grade? Einstein was a high school dropout. Friendships constantly dissolving because you have to be right all the time? They'll forgive you when you get them backstage passes to your Madison Square Garden concerts.

Sure, the first thing I'd probably do if I could go back in time to meet my sixteen-year-old self at the Berklee Summer Program would be to deliver a nice, hard slap across the face. I'd explain the merits of putting our head down and doing the work, as opposed to waiting for Rolling Stone magazine to call for a cover story. I'd make it clear that the moments I'll regret the most are times when I wasn't kind to those around me. Yet in the midst of delivering righteous tough love and wisdom, I imagine that the dominant emotion arising in me would be empathy. I know how tricky it is to strive for greatness while trying to develop goodness, especially with an underdeveloped brain and a hormone-ravaged body. Recognizing that I'm still a work-in-progress who makes mistakes on the regular, I'd

probably step off my soapbox, teach myself a few of my best songs from the future, and walk away.

Shaking off the time-travel daydream, I decide to spend the afternoon making music. I still have the Stratocaster, and it's still everything to me. Before I play a note, I run my hands over the deep gouges and finger the scratches that spread out like varicose veins, and sometimes I regret the damage I've done. I squint and imagine what it would look like without its scars. I think about what my life would be like if I hadn't spent so much energy proving my individuality. I plug in and turn up, and we start to speak to each other. At first it's just small talk, but before long, I'm spilling secrets that I can't even tell myself.