

Cut the Strings

All our lives we search for love, or try to hide from it. It drives us, moves us, captivates us, and empowers us. Our love can create unimaginable beauty or it can destroy us. It is unconscious. Ask the definition of love from 100 people and you will get 100 different answers. It's as if we're puppets on strings controlled by this love for which we long. At twelve years old my love found me and it moves those strings so well.

The stage is set, sound check was completed hours earlier, guitar in hand I'm ready to play until my fingers bleed. The excitement in the air is palpable as the sweat from the whiskey and coke is soaking through my shirt and hat. Two drinks ease the tension but more than three slur my fingers into a sloppy mess. It's a balancing act and it's time. We take the stage in a rush of energy as the lights kick in and the crowd of more than 500 people erupts into a roar. They're as ready as we are. A quick hello from our singer Andy and my fingers bare my soul in a flurry of technical rhythms that build until they explode into a heart-turning breakdown. The heavy beat of the drums fills the darkness, mixing with the pulse in my blood as I pound away on my axe treating it more like a murder weapon than a finely tuned instrument. I lift my head to see the crowd in full swing. Friends hitting friends, spinning kicks, and tossing each other like it's a battlefield. I created this chaos. For a moment I am a god.

I couldn't have known this was my future the first time I touched a guitar but on that stage of my first big show I reminisced. I was twelve years old when my fingers first graced the biting strings and soft rosewood fret board of Shane Wheeler's twelve-string guitar. Shane was my best childhood friend, a friendship that troubled my parents. Coming from a strict Catholic household the most I'd heard other than classical music was The Mama's and the Papa's. I may as well have been deaf before I heard the sweet sounds of Zao, Overcome, Nirvana, and The

Smashing Pumpkins at Shane's house that fated day. Then to hear Shane copy those sounds and recreate them on his own guitar was almost too much to bear. I was hooked, I had to learn; I had to make that incredible noise! I left that day knowing how to play Nirvana's 'Come as You Are' and The Violent Femmes 'Blister in the Sun.' Something was liberated in me sitting on Shane's bed holding a guitar for that first time, something understood. I was given the gift of music, a gift I deeply cherish still.

Communication is essential to life. Our basic needs should read: food, water, shelter and communication. Even Helen Keller found a way to relate to the world. Expressing yourself, then, is one of the most important things one can learn to do. There are myriad ways to express yourself but none as powerful as music. It transcends race, religion, sex, creed, and language. To create music and share your heart, note by note, is an indescribable feeling only a musician can know. It speaks to us on an emotional level, it is a universal truth; the language of the soul. Although it may be a vast variance of types, I've never heard someone say "I don't like music." Just like you can smile in any language, music tears down all barriers. Since I strummed my first E chord sitting on Shane's bed, my appreciation and love of music and the guitar has grown daily.

While traveling through Europe a few years ago, I watched a show in Prague by a band named Roe Deer. Language barriers in place, I could speak to no one but that was irrelevant as the music filled the air and our bodies brushed against each other. In the crowd of a large show personal space does not exist. We were sharing sweat and song and a feeling. We were sharing life. Exuberantly dancing with total strangers I caught an eye in the crowd. It was only for a split second but in that glance it was clear we both understood the magic in the music. In that instant I was taken back to that first touch of a guitar, to that incredible gift and I smiled. Later, on the

same trip, I was playing guitar in a hostel when a local sat down and picked up another guitar lying nearby. We never said hello, we never said goodbye. In fact, we never spoke a word but for a short while we shared our love as we filled that room with the sounds of our hearts. I was so grateful I could speak the language of the strings, so incredibly appreciative for that first touch of the nickel frets and for the callouses that adorned my finger-tips.

Music can be spontaneous or planned, brief or epic. It can be aggressive or sad or somber or positive. It can cause apprehension, relief, or understanding. It is an amazing feeling to play a song for someone after you have worked on it for months and watch their face as they comprehend the emotions you are trying to convey. This experience can be on a very personal level, with an acoustic playing a gentle tune for an audience of one, or on a grander scale in front of a packed house with an electric slamming away the rage that everyone wants to set free.

My music starts in my heart. It filters through my brain where nerve cells translate the emotion to my fingers. Man meets machine and the strings become my veins. The pick-ups listen closely and electricity makes possible a volume I cannot attain as the signal is amplified, carried by airwaves to ready and waiting ears, and again filtered through a brain delivered like a knife to the heart, hitting with full force. I watch as my feelings are transferred, heart to heart, beat by beat, to the crowd as best friends begin punching each other because there's just too much beauty in the world to comprehend. The imagination of a twelve year old is vast but there was no way for me to fathom, sitting there on Shane's bed holding a guitar for the first time, the depth of feeling that it would allow me to experience.

At twelve I picked up a guitar and it made sense. I wasn't thinking, "I want to be a star" or "This will get me chicks!" In fact, I don't recall thinking at all. I picked it up and I never

wanted to put it down. The guitar has taken me many interesting places and has formed many life-long friendships, but most of all it has let me express what I could not with words alone. Although as Bryan Ferry is quoted, “When you get music and words together, that can be a very powerful thing.” When I learned to sing and play the guitar at the same time, it was a revolution of my soul. The outlet I had loved for so many years took on an entirely new aspect and I poured out my emotion.

Eighteen years later and I’m still that twelve-year-old kid with a twelve-string guitar in my hands, overwhelmed by the potential energy it possesses. Every time I touch a guitar is the first time. Every time I am amazed. In an instant, the touch of an instrument transformed my life.

A folksy rhythm that begs you to bob along echoes from the sound-box of my mother’s 50-year-old Alvarez twelve-string and my own vaguely familiar voice pours forth words I am humbled to have written: “Always remember to never regret, love’s the puppeteer my dear and we’re just marionettes. So pass me that apple and I’ll eat with you, the snake in the shadow set the table for two. We’re just marionettes, we’re just marionettes, we’re just marionettes.” Always choose love. Let it guide you and speak for you, let it flow through you and from you, let it consume you. Then become that love and cut the strings.