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Not Your Average Neuroscientist

It's a Saturday night at a bar in Marlboro, New Jersey, and a group of 60-year-old band members are ready to begin their set list for the evening. The stage is small; however the energy is high as the lights dim and a cover of Steely Dan's "Deacon Blues," projects throughout the room.

The band members are relaxed, clearly enjoying each other's company as well as feeding off the crowd's spirit. An audience member can assume that this band doesn't care whether they're playing for two or 200 hundred people – they're just there to rock.

The lead guitarist flashes the crowd a wide smile as he strums and hums along with the chorus. Standing at 5 feet 7 inches tall, his stature commands the stage as a mop of curly brown hair bounces when he nods his head to the beat, and his bright-blue eyes gleam from the stage lights.

That's what Joshua Holtzberg hopes his life looks like in 40 years. Holtzberg, 19, has had an affinity for music since he first heard his dad playing classic rock on the radio. Formerly in a band and currently studying neuroscience at Boston University, Holtzberg strives to combine his interests in music and the brain – and believes that he can make further contributions to research showing their correlation.

While attending high school at the Academy of Allied Health and Science, a vocational school in Monmouth County, Holtzberg made the decision to devote his studies to medicine at an early age. Holtzberg's graduating class had a total of 68 students, making it difficult to find a tight-knit group of friends.

“I never really felt like I could find a niche, or a clique,” said Holtzberg solemnly, reflecting on his past. “I think that was just because the sample size was too small. But I always had my friends from home.”

Those friends from home were Holtzberg’s bandmates.

In middle school, Holtzberg and his fellow musicians met in their sixth grade choir class. The group stayed close throughout the awkward phases of middle school, and formed Contemporary BMT during Holtzberg’s freshman year of high school.

“We had our own interests, but we came together and were able to make our own kind of niche music,” said Holtzberg with a small smile.

One of Holtzberg’s former bandmates, Raymond Ge, distinctly remembered the band’s first and most memorable performance.

“We had performed at a local music festival to bring awareness to suicide prevention,” said Ge. “Looking back at it now, our setup was kind of janky.”

The band’s equipment was tossed into the back of a minivan as they sped to the venue. Their excitement to play in front of their largest audience yet blocked out any doubts of their ability to entertain – despite using a microphone meant for recording rather than performing.

“Overall it was a pretty surreal moment and definitely one that I am proud of,” said Ge. “We made the most out of the limitations on gear and little experience we had as a band together.”

Holtzberg continued to find ways to contribute to other social causes through music.

Some of Contemporary BMT’s early performances consisted of playing music for autistic children at a recreation camp named the Friendship Circle. The program strives to “envision a world in which people with special needs and their families experience acceptance, inclusion and

friendship as contributing members of society,” [according to the Friendship Circle’s mission statement](#). Seeing how music impacted children who typically felt disconnected from their peers helped foster Holtzberg’s fascination for cognitive neuroscience.

Additionally, Holtzberg’s own struggles with ADHD contribute to his desire to better understand brain function. His curiosity and personal experiences helped shape his outlook on life, as well as advice he would give to anyone else feeling overwhelmed by pressure from their peers.

“It often feels like you're competing with people who seemingly have more than 24 hours in a day. And at some point, you have to refuse to live like that, and you have to do things differently,” said Holtzberg with a look of certainty in his eyes. “Because that's the way your brain works. And anything other than accepting that fact is doing yourself a disservice.”

Moreover, finding ways to give oneself forgiveness has come in the form of music for Holtzberg.

“Music has always been a way to silence the sporadic nature and misfirings in my brain. It just quiets everything down and that's always been a way for me to focus,” said Holtzberg while fidgeting with his hands.

To his peers, Holtzberg is known as a shining light and symbol of warmth – who brings comfort wherever he goes.

One of Holtzberg’s close friends from high school, Sofia Roman, describes how he was, “known for the speaker that he had in his backpack at all times, and teachers even trusted him to handle the music at class events.” Holtzberg’s interest in music influenced their dynamic, as he always filled the silence with new songs he wanted to show her. “It’s expected, and natural, and something that I always look forward to.”

In the transition from attending high school in New Jersey to moving to Boston for college, Holtzberg continued to utilize music as both a reminder of home and as a way to connect with others. Despite leaving Contemporary BMT once moving to college, Holtzberg would continue

to explore new genres of music and meet new people who would expand his realm of lyrical knowledge.

“We like a lot of the same specific artists despite our tastes being very different and that was a point of bonding at the beginning of our relationship,” said Zeke Moroze, Holtzberg’s college roommate for the past two years.

At Boston University, Holtzberg has interacted with a variety of peers who provide unique, individualistic opinions on a variety of topics – including music. Growing up in a Jewish household, Holtzberg has seen how music can unite individuals and connect different cultures. Inspired by his own experience, Holtzberg has taken interest in how music can integrate individualistic genres from different countries and combine them to create a new sound.

Holtzberg excitedly started explaining the influence of Japanese jazz music as an example of a unique, expanding genre. “It’s so fascinating to see how they connect that to their traditional forms of music by combining that with American form jazz.”

Furthermore, the Golden Age Symphony in China devotes their musicality to fusing traditional Chinese and Western instruments to create a unique sound. Embracing both Chinese heritage and Western tunes, “the result is a captivating auditory experience that transcends cultural boundaries,” [according to M2 Presswire](#).

In addition to his curiosity, Holtzberg’s willingness to help others – despite however he might be inconvenienced – reflects favorable qualities of someone looking to work in healthcare.

Roman recalled a story from her senior year of high school, in which she discovered that her car had a flat tire after a long, stressful day at school. Spotting Holtzberg in the distance of the school parking lot, she called him and sobbed on the phone as she explained her situation. Holtzberg rushed over and took care of the entire situation, even reaching out to their English teacher for assistance. Roman remained grateful for that embarrassing, yet touching experience, as it was a defining moment in their friendship.

“Josh will always lift people up when they’re feeling low, even though he’s been made fun of for being too emotional countless times. That experience showed me how reliable and selfless Josh is as a friend, how lucky I am to have someone like that in my life,” said Roman.

In leaving his band and devoting the majority of his time to academic studies, Holtzberg made the difficult decision to put music production at a lower position on his priority list. Choosing to focus on job security in becoming a doctor, Holtzberg hopes music can once again become a larger part of his life at a later age.

“It's exciting to think about what I can do once I already have my life established,” said Holtzberg in relation to becoming a doctor. “It [music] will always be the number two thing in my head and I will always have a passion for it – for sure.”

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