

IN MY ROOM

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I've been a huge music fan since forever. Since my dad brought home a Beach Boys record and I figured out how to play it on my Fisher Price Phonograph and sang along to the songs, thinking the words to "Little Deuce Coupe" were Little Loose Tooth because I was 7 years old. Since I was a skinny preteen who jumped off the bed and ran across the room to my boombox to hit *record* the second a song I loved came on the radio.

I still care that much. I'm in my mid-40s now—hard to believe but it's true—and I still get excited about some band or musician every few days. I look up their pictures and lyrics online, follow them on Instagram, make plans to see them the next time they're in town. I go to shows and dance parties every week and let the music shock me back to life, over and over again—or I did, until March of 2020, when the world stopped turning.

The stopping felt violent. The loss was destabilizing. I didn't know how to cope with my feelings if I couldn't go to some grubby little room and let the music attack me, inhabit me, make everything else fall away. I really didn't. But as the weeks wore on the quiet got inside me. I slid into a funny, happy headspace that I hadn't been in since I was that kid still stuck at home. I didn't even remember what it felt like to be her until I was living that dreamy, solitary life again. It felt

like the stillness of the suburbs

like Augusts when the days are so thick they barely move

like when you're at a party and for just a moment you find yourself standing alone but you don't mind—you're there and you're not there, watching people talk and move around you—and that blip of existence feels like it could stretch on forever and it would be pretty nice.

When I was around 12 and 13, the age that I started waking up to what music meant to me, my parents did not give me permission to go to concerts with other kids. They also never, as some kids' parents did, took me to one themselves. It was never even on the table. The things I begged for instead, and eventually got, were:

Permission to stay up till midnight on Saturdays to watch the Headbanger's Ball on MTV

Occasional permission to sometimes get copies of Metal Edge and Circus magazines at the bookstore, which I would read like I was studying for a test

The wonderful pink boombox, which no one had access to but me—and actually, now that I think of it, was a birthday surprise. I didn't even have to beg for it. My dad was cool that way.

I had my own room growing up, and when I sat in there alone these objects were evidence of another world beyond my own tiny one. They linked me to it. The bargain bin at The Wall, a music store at the mall, was another portal. That's where I found a cassette of The Crow soundtrack and bought it because, though I hadn't seen the movie, I was pretty sure it was cool. (And it was cool. It was! The Cure wrote a song for that movie, darnit, and the soundtrack also introduced me, little baby me, to Joy Division via Nine Inch Nails' cover of "Dead Souls." **THEY KEEP CALLING ME!** God, that song altered my brain chemistry.)

Everything I knew about the bands I loved, I got from my magazines or from Rikki Rachtman's sloppy, cheerful interviews on *Headbanger's Ball*, plus whatever I could glean from the liner notes on my tapes. I learned as much as I could about the guys in the bands and then I turned them into my imaginary friends. I'd sit in the sort-of-finished basement by myself, TV beaming music videos into my eyeballs, smoking the butts of my mom's cigarettes that I stole out of the ashtray—True Menthol 100s, yep, I sure did—and pretended I was hanging out with the band on the nubby little couch down there, which kind of looked like the busted sofa on *The Ball*. I knew those guys would have thought I was cool and fun. I knew someone would, if I could just grow up and be allowed to *do* something.

Back then I spent most evenings in the kitchen doing homework, getting up from the table every few minutes to call Eagle 106 over and over until the DJ picked up and I could ask him to play Guns n' Roses' "Patience," even though I owned the album on tape and could listen to it anytime I wanted. There was just something so electrifying about hearing your request on the radio. Another link to the world I was so eager to join. A two-way link this time, a voice on the other end of the phone. "I'll try to get to it, hon," the DJ would say, and he almost always did.

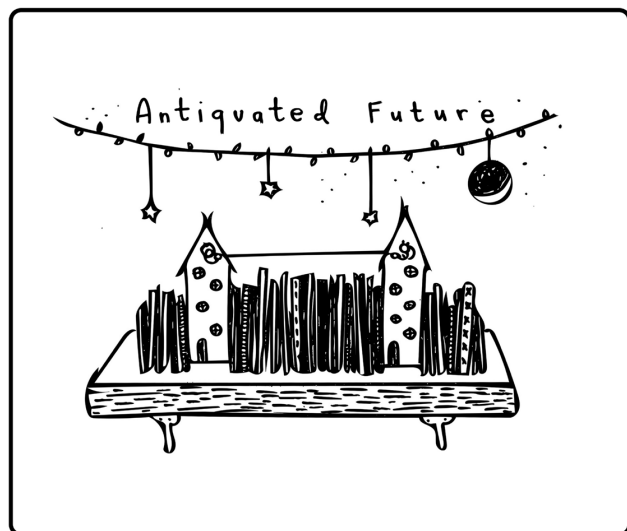
It would be years before I had a single friend who cared about any of the bands I loved, or before it even crossed my mind to want that. Music was, like so many things in my life have been, a solitary pursuit, a friendship I had with myself.

During the first few months of the pandemic, like the endless months that I was 12, I found a way to be okay. I sat on the hardwood floor of the small, sunny room I've made into my home office, stapling zines, singing out loud, and generally enjoying the hell out of my own company. The feeling that came back to me then was something I'd forgotten I knew: How to live in a Before time, when everything is quiet. With no place to go your life is pure potential, on the verge, about to break open.

It could be anything.



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