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County garage bands hone skills in the comfort of home

by Dennis Carter | Staff Writer

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The boys plug the instruments into their respective amps. They adjust their guitar chords and turn the volume up. Then down. And up again.

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A little feedback, a squeak, a pop. One more adjustment. The drums come in, followed by the bass, chased furiously by the electric guitar.

Suddenly, without warning, the sounds blend together: Three guitars pounding away, jumping from riff to riff. It's loud, really loud — the way the rock gods intended.

Welcome to the basement of Broken Alliance.

The band of Bowie teenagers is one of dozens in Prince George's that — like all musicians proud of their craft — love to work a crowd into a noise-induced frenzy, but can't wait for the solitude and privacy of



Bryan Haynes/The Gazette
(From left) Anthony LaVorgna Jr., Ojus Wayh, Ilia Asafiev and Josh Rocchio are the members of 44 lbs., a garage band based in Hyattsville.



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home rehearsals.

For these bands, schlepping heavy equipment is a small price to pay for a chance to let loose for a few hours every couple days.

Garage bands are nothing new — parents have been begging their belligerent sons and daughters to turn down the volume for decades — but the appeal has carried on, regardless of the musical genre.

Broken Alliance, a metal band formed by five Bowie middle-schoolers around 2001, has morphed from a “pop punk sort of band,” as drummer Stephen Giler said, into a harder metal band in the tradition of Metallica and Ozzy Osborne.

Translation: songs about the perils and hardships of teenage life are out. Lyrics about the end of days are in.

After picking up bassist Joe Hagar and some shuffling of band members, Broken Alliance played its first show at Greenbelt’s Eleanor Roosevelt High School coffeehouse in the fall of 2004.

As Mark Goggin remembers, the band’s countless hours of rehearsal paid dividends.

“They were really reaching for you up [on stage],” Goggin, 17, said to lead singer and rhythm guitarist Steve McGinnis during a Saturday afternoon rehearsal in the Gilers’ basement.

Crediting the brotherly cohesion of Stephen and Chris Giler, Hagar said Broken Alliance rarely struggled to blend

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their sounds and playing styles.

“We never really had awkward times where it didn’t work,” said Hagar, 18. “Ever since we first got together, it just sort of worked. ... We’ve always been able to make the kind of music we wanted to without problems.”

After years of grinding away in the basement — emulating and creating the best metal they can make — Chris Giler said with age has come improvement.

“We’ve definitely gotten more complex over the years,” said Chris Giler, 17, who doesn’t fit the stereotype of your average teenage guitarist. He can play a face-melting solo and he was recently accepted to two premiere colleges — just in case the rock star thing doesn’t work out.

44 lbs.

For Hyattsville-based 44 lbs., blending college life — and now, professional life — with jams sessions and the occasional show has never been a challenge. The band members, together for almost seven years, are far from a typical rock band. They talk of applying complex music theory and mixing chords and progressions.

They’re smart. Really smart.

Ilia Asafiev, a recent University of Maryland graduate who lives in College Park, said his journey to lead guitarist for 44 lbs. began with two instruments you may never find in a garage band’s arsenal.

“I played classical piano and the clarinet,” said Asafiev, 24, a native of Moscow whose childhood choir teacher pointed out he had “very good ears.”

When 44 lbs. formed in 2000, Asafiev felt he was ahead of the curve.

“Having a classical background helps you pick up [other kinds of music],” he said. “I already knew how different chords and progressions are constructed. ... If I hear the note, I can name it.”

Drummer Josh Rocchio is no musical slouch either. When he began his studies at Maryland, he knew what he wanted to focus on, but wasn’t sure if he could satisfy two seemingly different interests.

“I kind of wanted to do music,” said Rocchio, 24, a Rockville resident, “and I kind of wanted to do physics.”

Which direction did he take? Both, actually.

“I signed up for the physics of music.”

For this group of musical students, describing their genre requires more than a couple words.

As Asafiev said, 44 lbs. sound is “a blend of structured compositional precepts and eclectic sampling of omnieval influences, about which we are prone frequently to spiral into whack improvisational tangents.”

Simple folk might say the band lays a hip-hop beat over carefully melded mixes of guitar, bass and drums.

Or as Anthony LaVorgna, Jr. — known to his band mates as Ant — said, “We play a type of funk jam metal hop-hop. ... There’s no real easy way to describe it.”

The band has recorded two albums, “Go on Green” and “Waiting on Red,” although several members said they prefer the predictable comfort of a garage, basement or living room to the stuffiness of a posh, expensive recording studio.

“I’ve always loved being called a garage band because that’s what we are,” said LaVorgna of College Park, who, along with his band mates, was thrilled about the recent addition of bassist and Maryland student Ojus Wagh, affectionately known as Juice. “If you want to sip on a beer [in a garage] you can, and you don’t have to be afraid of tipping it over and ruining something in the studio.”

But as Rocchio pointed out, 44 lbs. is passed the days of indulging in more than a few drinks.

“We all gotta get up the next day and go to work,” said Rocchio, a teacher at Paul Public Charter School in the District. “We’re mostly geeks and dorks pretty much.”

But even geeks and dorks get psyched for the rush of a live show.

Live shows

The feeling seems to be universal: you take the stage in front of a couple hundred people, take one last deep breath and show them exactly how you've honed your music, your craft.

“In the studio, it's kind of like playing chess. You have time to think about your next move,” said Asafiev, who was also blessed with the gift of effortless metaphoric speaking. “But on stage, it's like playing tennis. You have to play intuitively. It's not as mechanical.”

For McGinnis, the soft-spoken, sideburn-sporting vocalist for Broken Alliance, a solid performance requires contributions from everyone on stage.

“You just have to feed off of each other's energy sometimes,” said McGinnis, 17.

Drummer Stephen Giler — who, at 15, is the youngest member of Broken Alliance — said he has one surefire way to pump up his band mates and the adoring crowd.

“You just throw the drumsticks in the air,” he said, smirking as if he revealed a well-kept secret.

One winter night in 2001, 44 lbs. played in front of their largest crowd to date — about 200 people at an Annapolis pizza parlor. Watching the mass of people respond to the band's carefully crafted sounds, LaVorgna said, was a feeling that's tough to forget.

“It's the best thing in the world to see more heads than you can count bobbing up and down,” he said. “One of the coolest nights I've ever had in music.”

Strumming, screaming and banging away might go over well in a local club, but how about in the basement a single-family home?

No big deal, Mom and Pop Giler said.

“We don't mind it. I actually like listening to them,” Joell Giler said as she quietly sat in the living room, snipping out letters for a science fair poster due in a few days.

Her husband, John Giler, a Bowie resident for 22 years, said a father has to set some sort of noise gauge.

“If it gets to the point where I can’t hear the TV, then I tell them to turn it down,” he said. “If they were just playing a bunch of loud noise, that would be pretty bad. But they’re not. They’ve gotten really good.”

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