

Girls rock (and get pretty pumped about it)

**Megan Ham, 13, and bandmates in Approx. Volume crank it up after a week at the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls**

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It's a warm summer Wednesday at the Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls, and 13-year-old Megan Ham is strumming her dream to life.

Dressed in a pink hoodie, her pink water bottle at her side and her fingernails striped girly pink and rocker black, Megan tests out a few chords on a bright red guitar during the camp's Instrument Instruction class.

"Being in a band would be the ultimate job," the eighth-grader at Sellwood Middle School says.

In just three days, Megan will be clocking in on her dream job.

She's not alone: 170 girls have enrolled for the first weeklong summer session of the camp, founded in 2000 by Misty McElroy to offer young girls a summer space for self-expression, a booster-shot of self-esteem and a sample of the real rock-world experience.

The campers have chosen instruments, grouped themselves into bands, composed an original song and begun practicing together.

Come Saturday, the 17 bands will make their respective debuts at the camp's showcase concert, to be held for the first time at the 700-seat Bagdad Theater in Southeast Portland.

Megan is the guitarist for Approx. Volume (named after a phrase found on her trusty water bottle). She's played guitar for two years and has performed in tap and jazz dance recitals, but she has never played her instrument for an audience. Saturday's debut of Approx. Volume will, Megan hopes, include a guitar solo.

She doesn't know why she was drawn to the guitar. It just could be that the bands filling Megan's iPod Shuffle have had an influence, though. Megan carries "7 Nation Army" by the White Stripes and Nirvana's "Heart-Shaped Box" with her at all times.

But she knows exactly why she opted for striped fingernails. "I just like to do things a little differently," she says, smiling.

With just three minutes left in this day's class, guitar instructor Maria Cincotta teaches the small class a quick riff from a Metallica song, demonstrating a slide of the pick that delivers a noisy scream of strings.

Megan's smile widens, and a moment later, her fingers are a small army of enthusiasm.

When she tries the riff, Megan splits the pick.

The girls in the band

Behind the pink door of practice room five, Approx. Volume has been working out "Invisible," a catchy pop-rock tune written by vocalist Sarah Roach, 11, who came to the camp from Colleyville, Texas.

Drummer Amelia Ley, 11, and keyboardist Amanda Welker, 16, complete the band, which on Monday was a far looser conglomeration of talent. By Wednesday, they have gelled; timing and talent have merged.

Megan's solo comes halfway through the song. It's counted as eight measures long. But still the band wants it thickened up to help lengthen the song. Megan suggests adding the riff she just learned. Amelia offers some extra drum-snaps after the last chorus. A run through from the song's bridge and -- boom! -- the song has expanded, nearly radio-ready.

The band and band manager, April Haitzuka, one of the counselors in the camp, dig the new version.

Time for a break?, April asks.

"Can we run through it, like, one more time," Megan asks, "and then take a break?"

A session called Quiet Band Practice, a time to sit outside and speak freely about band issues, follows the regular practice sessions.

Midweek, April has brought out a portable set of speakers. A band member can fit her iPod between the speakers and blare her favorite downloads for the rest of the group. April's hope is that the band will connect by listening, not just playing, music together.

It seems to be working. Sarah's iPod is playing, and the other girls' heads sway to the swirling pianos of Coldplay's "Clocks."

"This one is kind of old," Sarah says shyly, just before Devo's "Whip It" blasts out, causing giggles and setting heads bouncing.

"I love this!," Amelia says.

"I have 'The Best of Devo!,' " Megan says.

All four girls sing the words: "Whip it/ into shape/It's not too late/  
To whip it . . ."

Hold the Hilton tune

For an afternoon Songwriting Workshop held later in the big Rock Room, all the girls in rock camp are asked to write down a few songs they like, ones they don't like and to explain why.

Approx. Volume sits together, scribbling madly. Soon, Megan is offered the mike and a chance to explain her favorite song, "Heart-Shaped Box."

"It's soft, then it's really loud and makes me want to get up and dance around," she says.

What she doesn't care for, she says, is the song "Stars Are Blind" by Paris Hilton.

The rock camp counselor asks why.

"Well, people who listen to it must be really insecure," Megan says. "Because, it's, like, just about getting boys."

Pre-show buzz

At the last morning assembly, Friday morning in the Rock Room, Megan says she didn't sleep so well. It's one day now to Saturday's showcase. But it wasn't butterflies keeping her up. More like visions of the ultimate goal.

"I dreamt I was kicking a soccer ball into outer space," she says with a laugh.

The buzz among the campers is of what to wear for the show, and about the dress rehearsal to be held later on that day.

How does Approx. Volume feel they are doing so far? On a scale of one to 10 of awesomeness, with one being Paris Hilton, and 10 being Nirvana?

Keyboardist Amanda speaks for the band:

"We're a 12."

The dress rehearsal held late Friday afternoon in the Rock Room is a dry run with camp staffer Marisa Anderson explaining the details of the showcase, such as the time to meet at the venue, where to sit and to please NOT turn off the bass-amp when leaving the Bagdad's stage.

This is also the first time the bands can see and hear each other's work straight through.

Bands from Blue Wasabi to Too Hot for Enthusiasm take the camp's stage and have the other girls rocking. Approx. Volume, playing at high volume, ignites even more jumping and rocking out.

Fellow camper Mary Ruiz, 11, offers the first peer review of Approx. Volume: "They're like a mix of Michelle Branch-type of rock and Joan Jett," she says. "I love their sound."

Crank it up

Upstairs early Saturday evening, just before the start of the showcase, the campers fill the balcony of the Bagdad Theater. Faces are sparkled with glitter, and black dresses and skirts have replaced tees and jeans worn earlier in the week.

"I'm not really nervous -- excited, but not nervous," says Megan, dressed in a black top and black Converse with bright pink laces.

Relatives, friends and rock fans fill the seats below the rockers. Megan's fan base includes her mom, dad, brother, grandma and best girlfriend Lenny.

She practiced only a little today, she says. As she learned for her dance performances, "If you practice too much before, your mind goes into overtime. It's better to chill."

Approx. Volume sits together, trying to chill, but they can't sit still. They bound out of their seats, down the stairs, then back up to look over the balcony, until they're called to wait in the wings. It's a bit of a wait: They are third from last to hit the stage tonight.

The band Abstract opens the show, setting the big crowd cheering with its original anthem, "Shut Up and Let Me Rock!"

Later on bands such as the Electric Ligers add to the momentum: Liger's Osanna Drake plays a devastating tune on her flower-shaped pink guitar with an electric toothbrush.

Approx. Volume enters the tunnel to the stage around 7 p.m., as Killer Kittens meows and hisses onstage.

"Everybody here? Everybody tuned up?" asks camp volunteer Maria Schmieding, who holds ready the red stage curtains.

Approx. Volume lines up in the hall: Sarah, Amanda, Amelia and Megan, at the end, holding her red guitar. The band is gripped by a sudden stillness and remains quiet through Killer Kittens' set. Then Megan cracks her knuckles and shakes her hands free of the band's collective butterflies.

Applause, as the Kittens end their song.

Maria opens the curtains, and in a flash the Kittens rush from the stage, and Approx. Volume files onto it.

"Are you ready to crank it up with Approx. Volume?" Sarah asks the crowd.

There's applause. But apparently, not quite enough.

"I said, 'ARE YOU READY TO CRANK IT UP WITH APPROX. VOLUME??!'" Sarah repeats.

A new roar from the crowd.

Then the counts from Amelia's drumsticks, and Sarah sings the first catchy "La la la la's" of "Invisible" and Approx. Volume does indeed, crank it up, and out.

Megan executes her Metallica-inspired solo with a new (thicker) pick, and the band flows smoothly into Sarah's final, punctuating yell: "YEAH!"

More applause from Approx. Volume's biggest gig, so far.

They exit the stage, quickly, but not quietly. "We were so charged, I think, all the energy from the week just, like, hit!" Megan says offstage. Their manager pulls them into a band hug.

Instead of bounding into a tour bus, or out to party with groupies, the members of Approx. Volume opt to run back inside, to catch the remaining bands, more musicians performing in a showcase where everyone is anything but invisible.