

Teenage wasteland to boardroom

Thursdays are long days for me. Unlike the other four days of the week, they don't end until I have taken my 12-year-old son to his one-hour band class at Bach to Rock in Bethesda.

Sometimes I am wiped out at the end of a tough workday, and 60 minutes of loud music is not exactly what I crave. Too bad. Each Thursday evening, the day long gone, cold and dark, I sit uncomfortably perched on stacks of collapsible stadium seating and stare into my son's music studio observing the creation of rock.



Staff Notebook

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During one recent session I began to marvel at the whole process of forming a band and making music. It seems about as challenging as, well, starting a business. Both need a focused and inspiring leader who can guide the players through a lot of early — at times frustrating — work. Watching my son's teacher brought me to a startling conclusion: Alex, a cool musician dude in his 20s who looks like a young and skinnier Pete Townshend, would make a great startup CEO.

The band — Sonic Steel, if you must know — is in its most larval stage. My son is on drums, another kid is on guitar. The band is missing a few elements, namely a bass player and somebody who can — or is willing to — sing. Some have passed through like eager temp staffers hoping for a full-time gig. One potential bass player secretly wanted to play drums. He lasted a few sessions before his doting Russian parents pulled him out in search of another band. For a couple of sessions, the band was visited by a demonic girl who hated Green Day, Aerosmith and The Who but loved Miley Cyrus. Absent a love interest inside the band, the girl faded fast, like Yoko Ono's music career.

So the boys soldier on, banging and twanging and

hoping for a couple of new recruits with shared sensibilities. It's hard to get this band business off the ground. The thing is, they are starting to get pretty good, and most of the credit should go to Alex, the CEO.

Building a band seems about as difficult, unpredictable and subject to unseen market dynamics as building a business. There's the concept, the staffing, management and leading others toward an ambitious goal — in this case, a place in a battle of the bands at 9:30 Club later this year.

Most of the time the hour goes like this: They gather at a computer and search for songs they all like, or at least don't hate. This seems to take forever and is a bit annoying. If I'm paying for drums, I want to hear some dang drums! What's actually happening here is the CEO of the band is crafting a mission and getting buy-in from the staff. This is critical and cannot be rushed. The CEO tends to steer the boys toward the old testaments of rock: The Who, Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin.

From there they return to the studio, and the CEO begins building — note by note, riff by riff, drum fill by drum fill. At first the boys mess up, their timing all off. The CEO is unbelievably patient and encouraging. In no time he has helped the boys piece together the better part of a song.

Like a good CEO, Alex knows precisely where he wants the band to go and how to get there. The boys think he's really cool, and he is. They absorb virtually every bit of his guidance with enthusiasm.

If this young guy can squeeze Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" out of two 12-year-olds, a guitar and a beat-up drum set, one can only wonder what he could do with a startup. I have thought of taking Alex aside and telling him he would make a great CEO.

"What are you doing teaching kids music?" I'd say. "You could be the next Ted Leonsis."

Though a faint and flickering sense of reason suggests that he would look at me like I were Ward Cleaver and start laughing. Back off, old man.