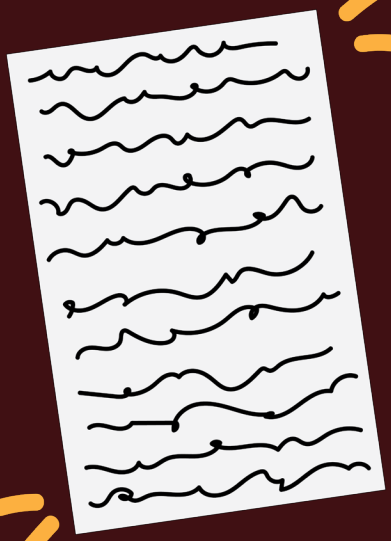

Harlow Inman



Matchbox Open Mic: Where art and youth intersect

"You're asking a student to leave behind whatever it is they're doing to come here to be creative for a couple of hours. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it is a lot."

Harlow Inman



It's a Saturday night towards the end of January, and above the bustling downtown filled with couples, families, and friends enjoying their night, a growing group of teenagers gather to share their performances. Sitting in the middle of this crowd of mainly teens, I wasn't sure what to expect from Matchbox Open Mic, and it's safe to say I was absolutely blown away by the brilliant poetry, music, and comedy shared by my peers. Over the course of two hours, under the ambient lighting of the second floor of Red Rock Coffee shop, countless artists took the stage to sing, recite original poems, play instruments, and even perform comedy. As soon as the magic of performance began, it was clear that this event was more unique than the average open mic. I had entered this event unfamiliar to this community, and throughout the night, as I talked with people and watched the acts, I felt the creative fire of the performers and attendees envelop me, leaving me feeling incredibly satisfied and inspired.

What makes Matchbox unique

Matchbox Open Mic night is a unique event for its area, providing a space for youth in the Silicon Valley area to showcase their performance art. For artistic teens looking to share their vulnerable work, especially in a climate that tends to prioritize the pursuit of STEM careers and monetarily abundant pathways, the importance of this space cannot be overstated. Serving as the intersection of art and youth in the Bay, performers and organizers alike attest to its special role in the community.

Red Rock has been running their own open mic which is, according to the Mountain View Voice, the longest running in the Bay. This traditional open mic, which typically fills up the second floor of the shop, is a hallmark part of the community, with performers in the area relying on it as a venue for their work. Ultimately, this is an adult-focused event, with the majority of the performers being over 19 years old. "You know, that's so intimidating, … if you're coming in as an eighth grader … and you're performing in front of or alongside college students, I know that can create some nerves," says Kaiden Luis, the current owner of Matchbox Open Mic. Red Rock's open mic also follows the traditional method of creating a lineup: on the spot and with no sign-ups ahead of time. Aware of the suspense and anxiety that often surrounds the experience of performing with adults or being in an uncertain lineup, Kaiden has made Matchbox a much more comfortable environment by imposing an age restriction of 13-19 years old, and creating a pre-determined setlist. "...I've put in a lot of effort into making sure not only are the bouts balanced in the entertainment value of like, returning performers who I know are really strong, and spreading those out so the audience remains entertained and in the mood," explained Kaiden, elaborating on one of Matchbox's most unique features. These features of Matchbox keeps new performers coming in and previous performers coming back. Amanda Ford, a senior poet at MVHS, explains the appeal of the event: "It doesn't feel intimidating, it actually feels really natural. And I think it's just because of the atmosphere that they've created there."



A returning band prepares for their set during intermission

Who matchbox serves

The teens who attend this event come from highly rigorous high schools such as Los Altos High, Mountain View High, and Palo Alto High, ones who often produce graduates who end up working in technology, business, and engineering. Naturally, these schools show heavy support for these pathways, with countless CTE offerings and academically challenging classes. For a student interested in STEM, this is an ideal environment. For a student interested in the arts,

they can oftentimes feel left in the dust. Founders of Matchbox, Jordan Rahmfeld and Kaiden Luis, were responding to the evident lack of support for youth arts in their creation of Matchbox. The duo, with roots in performance poetry through Youth Speaks in San Francisco, realized that "it was insane for even us to be able to try and get up there [San Francisco] and we couldn't imagine how hard it was for other people." The problem was, there were no youth-centered open mic events anywhere closer. From this conflict, Matchbox Open Mic was born, and has been serving the artistic youth in the area ever since. Everyone from performers to photographers to illustrators have a place in this event, since each month new posters, photos, and lineups are needed.



As a teenager myself, I speak for the majority of the youth in the Silicon Valley districts when I say it is all too easy to go from one obligation to another (whether that be school, sports, extracurriculars, or a job), living entirely on a schedule comprised of transactional activities. With the rise of big tech in this area in the past decades, there is an immense pressure placed on our school districts and our parents to produce, and ourselves to become, the next generation of innovators. We are taught that to reach such success, we must center our lives around acquiring the most achievement we can. A 4.0+ GPA is the bare minimum. Multiple AP classes are the standard. If you're not doing a ridiculously-priced "pay to play" summer program at a prestigious college, are you even trying to get accepted into college? The effects of this pressure cooker society we've built is no secret to those who live here, with the red flag effects being extensive. Stanford Health experts say that as of 2026, the town of Palo Alto has entered its third youth suicide cluster, with more than five PAUSD students having died by suicide since 2024 according to San Jose Unified. NPR states that, "...much of the dialogue around the issue centers around stress at school, such as excessive homework or the rigors of advanced placement courses." It is evident that the stress placed on students in these rigorous Bay schools is shaping teenagers' youth with an iron fist. The pressure has created a transactional culture. Students give their time, energy, and parents' money to things that they view as beneficial to their future, and in turn, they receive a boost that gets them closer to their academic and career goals. Consequently, youth relationships and activities are based on an economic level of exchange, while the value of third spaces and deeper, reciprocal relationships fade.

An artistic third space

Third spaces are locations separate from home and work/school that foster community without obligation, and, according to PubMed Central, are where "...people can meet, express themselves, relax, play, and build community, often at little material cost or personal effort." In the midst of the wreckage of COVID-19 and the increasing accessibility of technology and social media, multiplied with the exchange-based society we already are a part of, in-person third spaces are few and far between. Apps like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, act as online third spaces, filling the void for the lack of youth-based community. Reciprocal relationships become harder to find, as teens are mainly interacting in school or





"If you're more timid, go check it out as an audience member first, you'll see just how easy it is. We're all supporting, clapping and cheering and if you mess up, people embrace it."

A performer's decorated guitar

work settings, and relying on the effort and energy they put into those settings to produce them some sort of benefit. It becomes easier to interact on the basis of "I give you something and you return something." Relationships come with obligations and expectations, and aren't based on human connection, care, and intrinsic bond. This is why third spaces are so incredibly important, because they come with no obligations, no expectations, and allow for a deeper human connection between those who enjoy such spaces. Being a part of a third space as a teen has immense benefits towards development. According to the Shanker Institute "linked to higher levels of cooperation and self-control, less hyperactive behavior, better conduct in school, better peer relations, and greater emotional adjustment to change." It is highly underemphasized in our bubble of the Bay, but being involved in a third space is a critical part of a well-rounded lifestyle.

Plans for the future

Matchbox Open Mic is currently doing the heavy lifting of filling the youth-centered third-space shaped hole in our area, especially for teens who find enjoyment in the arts. It doesn't demand money or perfection to participate, and those who attend do so for the joy of community, human connection, and art, without expectations. Kaiden speaks directly on the impact of Matchbox, saying, "especially in a time where stuff can feel so divided, and we can feel so isolated, and especially being teenagers … to be able to sit there and feel and hear like, these are our people. This has become our clique, our space, our community … community is our base, that is what we are trying to do." Amanda also describes how inclusive the community is: "...there's times where I go to Matchbox when my friends aren't able to come … I especially appreciate how welcoming and inviting people are. I could just get up and talk to anyone."

Matchbox stands out as one of the few longstanding and successful third places for youth performance in the area and the community is growing. In recent months, after much planning, the organization announced an exciting new event: Matchbox Workshop, a monthly poetry workshop event at Red Rock which falls under the Matchbox organization along with Matchbox Open Mic. This workshop has hopes of replacing one monthly Open Mic with a slam poetry event, with the goal of sending involved performers to compete in San Francisco based slam poetry events. With the expansion of Matchbox into workshops and open mic, it is evident that the attempt to put emphasis on the importance of performance art made by two high schoolers years ago is reaping great benefits. Matchbox serves as a pillar of hope in the youth artist community, whether it be encouraging people to get vulnerable on stage or inspiring people to pursue the creation of their own artistic spaces. Young artists, from performers to photographers to illustrators, have all found their place at Matchbox, and the recent expansion of the event hints towards ever growing involvement in the community.



About the Author

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Harlow Inman is a junior at Mountain View High School and Freestyle Academy, with a focus on film production. She finds fullfillment in her job, her fashion choices, babysitting, going to the gym, and listening to her favorite music.