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Mr. Greco

English III

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The Life of a Musician

Coming from a garage in Mountain View, California on Monroe Street, one can hear drums smashing, electric guitars, singing, a piano, and many other instruments emitting hundreds of sounds a minute combining together to make a singular yet beautiful rhythmic sound. Tens, sometimes hundreds of hours can be put into writing a song. From the first steps of finding inspiration, to the writing, to the playing, and finally to the finished product, one can certainly say that being a musician isn't easy. There are many benefits, but also detrimental effects to being a musician. There are difficult decisions to make all along one's musical career, both emotionally and artistically. Dominic Christiansen is a self-taught 17 year old musician who makes indie rock in his bedroom. Let's dive into this young, aspiring musician's life as he navigates the emotional and artistic challenges of his dream career in music.

Dominic would tell you that he sees himself as a pretty average musician. He says, "I'm not an incredible singer. I'm a very average singer. I've only been playing guitar for a couple years and I don't understand it that well." But his statistics say otherwise. After releasing only one EP with four songs, under his artistic name, Dominic Crosby, he has amassed 60,000 plays on Spotify and Soundcloud, the music streaming platforms. This early success is both a blessing and a curse because it tempts him to go for a career as a musician. But at the same time, he knows that he has to make decent money to be able to support himself, and musicians are famously poor. He knows that he is getting a late start in the field and that, unlike kids with years

of music classes, Dominic is self-taught. Worst of all, he has to make this life-impacting decision in the next year, as deadlines for college applications loom. Millions of teenagers have a passion like Dom, whether that is being a musician, an athlete, or a doctor, and they are all facing this same decision: to either go for it, or give it up as a fantasy. Dom's story is striking because he brings such emotional intelligence to this decision, and that same emotional intelligence shows up in his music.

Raised in Mountain View, California and currently attending Los Altos High School as a junior, Dominic has grown up playing music all of his life. Dominic has been writing little pieces of music in his head since before he can remember. "Honestly I guess a lot of good times go back to Rock Band the video game when I was like six or seven at my dad's house glamorizing the Rockstar lifestyle. My dad also put me on to a lot of music and played music like Metallica, for example." But it wasn't until a few years ago that Dom fully immersed himself in making music. As he says, "The first time I really sat down and decided I'd make a song was in 8th grade when I was in a band called Monroe. The band was with my friends Solomon, the guitarist, Reyes, who played bass, and myself on the drums and vocals. The first song we made is a pretty bad song but we did it and ended up releasing an EP at one point too." After Monroe broke up due to one member of the band moving, Dom started to write and record his own songs, playing all of the parts himself. "I mostly stick to guitar and drums and then I have to sing." Traditionally, a kid like Dom living in the suburbs would never have had a shot at releasing his own music. He would have needed an agent and a record label to sign him. But today, Dom was able to teach himself the audio editing software called LogicPro by watching YouTube videos. He was able to post his music on SoundCloud and then on Spotify later on. And when enough people happened to like it and pass it on, this bedroom rock star got 60,000 plays in just 18 months.

As said by LetsTalkMusic, an account that explores the various aspects of being a musician states, “The musician traditionally approaches music with instruments, composition, musical theory (usually Western), and structure. They create music with their genre in mind, and their approach to creation stems from their instruments they've grown accustomed to. This includes rappers, with lyricism being their instrument” (“The Difference Between a Musician and an Artist”). In contrast, Dom approaches composition more spontaneously with no specific structure. “When creating a song, it is always off the top of my head. A lot of the best stuff I've written was just sitting down with an acoustic guitar. My guitars are not even plugged in or anything. I'm just walking around and I get this melody.” For Dom it's much more important to formulate the bigger idea of a song and not get caught up in a specific way your guitar may sound. “Don't get caught up in all of the small things,” he advises. But underlying Dom's casual approach is a careful calculus. Because Dom is self taught, he intuitively knows to constrain himself and keep his songs simple. As the filmmaker Orson Welles once said, "The enemy of art is the absence of limitation.” Dom explains, “Maybe you have to keep the song simple just because you can't play guitar. But there's still potential to make amazing music even if you may not have the biggest vocal range. If you hit your notes, it can still sound pretty.” The simplicity of Dom's music is a big part of its power.

Despite his early success, Dom is haunted by his lack of formal music training. “The biggest challenge is pretty obvious. It's that I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm not that good at guitar, I'm just good enough at drums, but not amazing. And my chops aren't incredible. I'm a very average singer, and then I barely understand the software that I use.” Dom has a skeptical view of his chances at success in the music field, as well. “As much as I'd love to be a professional musician, a touring artist, or a recording artist, you only hear about the success

stories. Those are the ones who you get to see online who get to be famous.” And he questions whether even successful musicians are happy. “Even those in the 1% who succeeded, it seems like so many of them are just so unhappy which is hard for me to see. In my eyes they have everything yet all their songs are just about how much they hate themselves. It's pretty discouraging.” Even despite this, as shown by Psychology Today, “Music can be a powerful tool for identity development. Young people derive a sense of identity from music” (“Music, Emotion, and Well-Being”). And for Dominic, music has done just that. “I feel like I'd be a little bit lost if I wasn't like Dominic, the kid that does music. I kind of know I'm going to have to find something else to do in the future but music is really important to me and I will always love making it.”

Like millions of high school juniors, Dom is under a lot of pressure to do well in school, and at the same time, he is wrestling with this high-risk career decision. He's not trying to decide whether to become an accountant. He can decide to be a musician and struggle financially the rest of his life. And unlike accounting, failure as a musician is public. You can face an empty concert hall. You can release an EP you've killed yourself creating for two years and get no plays. And you can get panned by critics and on social media. Dom reflects, “I don't know if it's smart for me to set an ultimate goal, you know. Music is so unpredictable. I'm not really committing to anything specific. But in the near future, I'm going to try to make as much music as I can in high school, because I see it as a very artistically free time. And then hopefully I will end up going to college somewhere where the music scene is good, and I'll have a little catalog I can show other musicians or record labels.” Dom is using his emotional intelligence to navigate this major life decision, and not letting the stakes paralyze him. This won't be the last time he faces tough decisions as a musician. Musicians constantly have to decide which of all their works

the public will hear. If they share too much, they stand to lose their audience, and if they share too little, they can become stuck in one sound and also lose their audience. And as Reverb Nation, a social networking site focused on the independent music industry points out, “If you’re too critical of your music, you’ll never finish anything. But if you share each and every musical idea you create, you’ll risk losing your audience’s attention. Finding this balance is only getting trickier in a musical climate where artists are creating more work to satisfy listeners (“The Importance Of Making Music You’d Actually Want To Listen To”).

While Dom faces this tough decision, the pressure is on for him to keep creating. Yet, fear can make any artist procrastinate as Reverb Nation states, “A lot of artists feel strangled creatively by self-doubt” (“The Importance Of Making Music You’d Actually Want To Listen To”). As Dom says, “I think writing music is very scary. I sit in front of my desktop and it just feels like this huge thing that I don't understand.” But in the end, Dom is able to overcome his fear and he leaves us with some advice for all other aspiring artists, “I think a lot of people are intimidated by the idea of writing a song and I would just say, sit down and make something. And that goes for all artists. Just go do it.”

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