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### Madsen & Music

A girl with auburn hair sits alone in her room, on her bed, a guitar gently cradled in her arms. She strums the guitar, hums a melody, and scribbles a collection of lyrics on a sheet of binder paper lying in front of her. Discarded pieces of paper are strewn across her bedspread, rough-draft verses written in smudged ink. Guitars and ukuleles in various shapes, sizes, and colors hang on the wall to her right, and a sleek chestnut piano is pressed up against the wall across from her. A pantheon of posters surround her, from Alvin Ailey's Dance Theater troupe to a middle school production of Freaky Friday Jr, with letters from friends and photo strips peppered in. Many say that your bedroom is a reflection of your mind. Evidently, teenage singer/songwriter Rose Madsen has music on the brain.

16-year-old Madsen is a Junior in high school and a San Francisco Bay Area based musician, frequenting venues from Santa Cruz to Mountain View to play gigs. She describes her genre as folk/pop/rock, drawing influence from her favorite artists such as Carole King and Big Star, as well as her father, fellow musician Aaron Madsen. Her music explores stereotypically "teenage" themes, such as relationships and self-acceptance, however, she often ventures outside female songwriter norms by writing about heavier topics, such as being the daughter of an immigrant, or sexual assault. (Madsen) She is a gifted lyricist, using poetic devices to portray complicated, emotional subjects in a captivating way, and she puts heartfelt care into the production of her songs.

Although Madsen has a deeply personal relationship with music, she dreams of pursuing a music career and reaching a larger audience with her songs, an exciting yet daunting goal. As a young female artist, she's already encountered a plethora of challenges with the music industry, in particular, learning how to handle legal processes when working with a record label. However, the setbacks she's encountered, and those she will face ahead, will undoubtedly be learning opportunities, teaching her how to navigate a future in music. In all, her lifelong relationship with music has shaped different skills and experiences throughout her life, challenging her and bringing her closer to herself. As she builds her discography, expands her audience, evolves in her musical skills, and encounters new opportunities, Rose Madsen will be a name to follow in music.

Madsen's journey with music began early. Like many other artists, she was a very musical child, making up songs as soon as she could form sentences. Her mother, Inga Lysaya, revealed that she would make up her own words to whatever music was playing at just three years old. Yet, much of Madsen's love for music was fostered by her father, Aaron Madsen, a former music producer until his daughter was about six, and current guitarist for the Santa Cruz centered band *The Honey Wilders*. Madsen's father was her connection to the world of music as she grew up, allowing her to see steps of the music production process firsthand at a young age. The family had a music studio in their backyard, and samples of a young Rose talking can even be heard on some songs produced by her father. As she grew older and developed her musical abilities, she was invited to sing background vocals for groups such as Amy Angel and the HellRaisers. (The Women's Int'l Music Network)

A talented musician himself, Aaron Madsen has been a part of the Bay Area music scene for years. He had already taught himself how to play the guitar by the time he went to his first

music lesson, in which his teacher told him his techniques—such as the way he held the guitar, or played picking patterns—were wrong, but learning the right techniques would worsen his ability to play. However, like many other gifted musicians, his distinctive techniques allowed him to succeed early in life; by the time he was sixteen he was playing with well-known rock groups in the area. (Madsen)

His talent and experience aided Rose's musical education; he would often sit her down and go over basic guitar chords, or play her some of his favorite seventies rock. When Madsen wanted to begin producing her own songs, he was extremely supportive and offered to teach her how to use music production equipment. She released her first single, *You and Me*, in 2020, and continued to produce songs to such a degree that she eventually had an hour of music to play at gigs, or as an opening set for her father's band. (Madsen)

Having an early musical education and insight into the industry has undeniably helped Madsen on her journey. She even acknowledges the easy access she's had to musical opportunities through her father, jokingly calling herself a "Nepotism baby of the Bay Area music scene." So, what is it about Madsen that makes her musical so special?

Madsen's music is emotional, relatable, and passionate, with incredible craftsmanship due to her musical capabilities and brilliant use of poetic devices. However, what truly sets her apart from other musicians is the fact that music has become interwoven in her life as she's grown, making it a habit rather than a hobby. In looking to music as an outlet for self-expression, a way to connect with friends and family, an escape from academic pressure, a way to address challenges, and so much more, she has forged a lifelong closeness with the art form, to such an extent that it has developed into an instinctual loyalty. Best summed up by her mother; "She writes songs because she can't *not* write them." Lysaya said. "It is a way of creative people."

Although Madsen enjoys all aspects of the music production process, songwriting is arguably one of her favorite parts. Like many other teenage musicians, she draws inspiration from her experiences with relationships and her personal struggle defining her own identity. (Amit) However, she's not afraid to write about heavier topics that would be considered taboo or less marketable in mainstream "radio" music. Sexual assault, being the daughter of an immigrant, and the pain of feeling like she withholds love from others, are just some of the layered topics she's addressed in past songs. In comparison to other musicians, who often portray themselves or others as one-dimensional, Madsen takes on the challenge of writing about the complexities of human nature. Furthermore, she is profoundly empathetic and has a deep social emotional awareness, which allows her to effectively illustrate complex social situations and emotions in relatable terms within her songs.

All the more impressive, she has a vast literary knowledge (Amit), and draws from it to depict her song's subject matter creatively. Often, she uses narrative techniques such as metaphors or analogies in order to poetically articulate her emotions, her circumstances, or a particular experience. An example of this can be found in her latest single, *Fall to Pieces*, in which she details the social dynamics of her kindergarten relationships, in order to depict the feeling of isolation. (Madsen)

Because Madsen explores deeply personal content within her music, songwriting has become a habitual outlet for processing her emotions and clearing her mind. She even finds that the process of songwriting can open her eyes to emotions she didn't know she was experiencing, making her more self aware. (Madsen) For teenagers in particular, who are drawn to music because it "helps define us" at our most transitional and formative stage, songwriting has proven

to be a beneficial outlet for self-expression and understanding how human emotions flow. (Princeton Health)

In fact, the relationship between teenagers and music plays a considerable role in Madsen's career, and demonstrates why she is different from other artists. According to Vox's "*Who runs the world? Not Teenage Girls*," teenagers drive the trends that determine musicians' success. Consequently, many prominent musicians produce songs with "teenage" themes, such as bad breakups, or high school social dynamics, in an attempt to be seen as relatable and profit off of those who connect with their content. (Vox) Despite the fact that teenagers face a multitude of complex experiences beyond the typical tropes represented in popular music, the music industry—for the most part—values creativity by its yield.

By comparison, Madsen's use of complex subject matter solicits a larger teenage audience because she can easily articulate what others her age are actually feeling. She can write actively about the teenage experience, expressing her own emotions in her songs "immaturely" (Madsen) without worrying about their marketability.

She is extremely appreciative of her teenage audience, and values the fact that her music is considered relatable. As someone who cares deeply about what others have to say, forging a connection with her listeners and understanding how they interact with her songs is incredibly important to her. For instance, her Spotify artist analytics display her streamers' location, age range, (18-22 and 12-17) and the number of streams she gets per song. According to Spotify's data, her single *Fall to Pieces* was seven people's most streamed song. "It's just crazy that something I wrote would connect with someone so much, and they were all teenagers," Madsen explained. "The fact that I'm connecting with people that are my age is just really satisfying."

Although Madsen's love and passion for music seemingly promises a career, she faces heavy backlash from her social and academic environment. Living in the heart of Silicon Valley, Madsen is consistently told that pursuing a STEM career is the only way to become successful, an expectation tailored by the success of the high-tech companies in Silicon Valley. As Madsen's mother, Lysaya remarked that she is often told she should encourage Madsen to pursue a "realistically lucrative" path by others, finding that she repeatedly defends her decision to support Madsen's passion. (Lysaya)

As a matter of fact, the rigor of the Silicon Valley work environment and the resulting emphasis placed on productivity—often referred to as "hustle culture" (The Dance Journalist)—consequently affects academic environments such as Madsen's high school, by encouraging students to undertake heavy workloads with the expectation that it's manageable. (NBC Bay Area) Although Madsen isn't pursuing a STEM career, she feels the same pressure to take difficult courses and fill her free time with extracurricular activities like her fellow students. Ever since she was young, she's felt the impact of the Bay Area's competitive and unhealthy focus on academic achievement—for years she was obsessed with being valedictorian, until a B grade during her sophomore year disqualified her from the opportunity. "And I was not okay with that," She explained. "I was really emotionally distraught for a really long time." (Madsen)

Furthermore, Madsen's preparation for a potential music career is impacted by the pressure to succeed and the idea that it can be achieved through hustle culture. She has numerous music-related extracurriculars, including voice lessons, music competitions, dance, both in and outside of school, choir, musical theater, acting as the current president of GIFT—a nonprofit theater company—in which she also directs, backstage crew, and more, as well as her growing music career. (Rose's Theatrical Resumé) Rightfully, Madsen believes it's important to have a

balance of academics and fun extracurriculars, however, she chooses for her extracurriculars to assist her in her music career, contributing to the amount of work she has to accomplish on a daily basis. Clearly, the impact of Silicon Valley's imminent hustle culture can turn a balanced set of activities into an overwhelming workload by being classified as "not doing enough." (NBC Bay Area)

In addition, Silicon Valley's persistent message of success is accompanied by the academic trials Madsen's parents have faced, pushing her to work extremely hard. Her mother immigrated to the Bay Area from Russia to pursue work and further education, placing an importance on high achievement and making Madsen feel like she has to utilize all the opportunities America has to offer. Her father didn't finish high school, and she knows that her academic success could reflect what her father couldn't accomplish. By the time she had graduated middle school, she had completed more math than her father, leaving her feeling like she was, "quite literally, what he wished he could have done." (Madsen)

Many first-generation Silicon Valley students feel similar pressures to work hard and pursue the STEM career path their parents have established for them. (Santa Clara University) Madsen is under unique circumstances, she still feels pressured to succeed for her family and the risks they've taken to give her academic opportunities, but they are also willing to support her in pursuing music—nonetheless upholding the expectation that she needs to succeed. Her peers often assume that her parents don't care whether or not she pursues STEM, exclaiming that she's lucky, or that she's "escaped." (Madsen) In reality, her parents don't pressure her to pursue STEM because they are dependent on a music career working out. "My mother and father are so incredibly supportive," She explained. "But that comes with the caveat of, they want it to go

somewhere. If my parents were just like, oh yeah, like make this music that's fun for you, I wouldn't have had a record deal. I wouldn't be playing so often, like professional gigs.”

The notion that Madsen’s choice to pursue music has to result in success is further reinforced by the lack of awareness in Silicon Valley around a career in art and what it entails. There is an expectation that if you are “giving up” the opportunity to pursue STEM for art, you will undoubtedly succeed. The cost of pursuing art in the Bay Area comes with the pressure of being the best at it, therefore, Madsen often finds herself preparing for success rather than enjoying music because she loves it.

It is difficult for Madsen to find solace within the external and internal pressures she faces. Although she is still exploring how to manage extracurricular activities, school, and family pressures, she is incredibly driven, which has proven to be her greatest skill as she navigates the challenges of Silicon Valley. Yuval Amit, Madsen’s best friend—who has seen firsthand how Madsen approaches her workload—explains, “On any given day I could think of 10 responsibilities that Rose could be working on. But I think it's her passion—for being the best version of herself, and for putting a little sunshine with the world—which helps her complete them.” (Amit)

Although Madsen is driven to succeed academically, it is arguably music and how much she wants to pursue it that remains her main motivation. Her work ethic and commitment to music is what enables her to take on a large amount of responsibility, and fuels her as she strives to reach for her goals.

Despite her busy schedule, she is able to dedicate time to her music career by playing local gigs throughout the Bay Area, spending her evenings in cafes, breweries, and public venues. These events present her with the opportunity to perform in a supportive environment,



make connections with local musicians and industry professionals, and, most importantly, play music solely for joy.

Performing live is not new for Madsen, in fact, she's had experience playing gigs since she was young. Often, she has been asked to substitute for her father's band when they needed an opener, or an extra twenty minutes of music. (Madsen) She now explores opportunities to play as an independent musician, most recently, playing professional gigs such as the San Jose Blues and Brews Festival in 2022. (Madsen's Theatrical Resumé) Gigs also provide an opportunity for Madsen to perform in front of an audience, one of her most valued aspects of being a musician. In addition to her talent as a songwriter, she is able to communicate the subject of her songs with her alluring vocals, emotionally connecting to her audience. When she's not playing local venues, she continues to perform by participating in musical theater productions, one of her additional passions and incredible skills. Amit, who often attends Madsen's gigs and open mic performances, illustrates how talented of a performer Madsen is, "I can equate Rose singing one of her songs on stage to what would happen if you hurt a nuclear bomb's feelings," He said. "An explosion of energy, singing with so much passion and heart that people have started crying." (Amit)

Through Madsen's local performances, her music career has flourished, and she has become a recognizable name to many in the Bay Area music scene. In 2021, her growing reputation caught the attention of Chicanery Chick Records, a local label and subsidiary of Australian company Golden Robot Records. Chicanery Chick aimed to provide opportunities for local female musicians to showcase their music, with a mission to combat the misogyny women often face in the music industry. (Feminism in India) Madsen's initial excitement about the opportunity was eclipsed by legal issues with the label; Lysaya, a paralegal, shared the contract

with an attorney in her firm to review the agreement, unfortunately discovering it contained exploitative terms. “The contracts are unfairly drafted with no desire to meet the new artists halfway.” Lysaya explained.

Ultimately, Madsen’s name was too small to negotiate the terms or make any kind of demand, serving as a rude awakening and exposing her to the interior of the music industry. She was advised by her father to concede on certain ownership rights, as he believed Madsen’s focus should be on her music getting traction. (Madsen)

As a result, Madsen released *A Thousand Picks* under Chicanery Chick Records, and worked with them until they dissolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Lysaya) Due to the label’s lack of communication as they dissolved, Madsen and her family underwent a legal battle in order to protect the rights to her songs—the parent company, Golden Robot records, even tried to adopt Madsen’s brand, along with many other artists under Chicanery Chick.

Unfortunately, many of her songs were removed from streaming platforms after her legal dispute, leaving Madsen feeling like she had nothing to show for her accomplishments. “*A Thousand Picks* had, I think 72,000 streams before it was taken down,” She remarked. “And now it’s slowly crawling its way back up. And I would have over 100,000 streams on that song right now.” (Madsen) Although working with Chicanery Chick was a disappointing experience, when reflecting on what it taught her, Madsen believes it helped her learn how to advocate for herself, especially within legal settings. “I was not as forward back then as I am now. And now I know how to say: this is what I want, this is what I need, and I’m not conceding on it,” she explained.

While Madsen’s experience was challenging, many young female artists have likely encountered similar circumstances. It is especially common for aspiring artists working with a label for the first to be taken advantage of—however, most musicians at any professional level

have experienced the exploitative power dynamics driving the music industry. According to Madsen, the music industry is naturally exploitative, similar to the film industry, the theater industry, and any other creative industry based on stardom. "Because creativity is based on perception, you don't have concrete numbers like you do with other jobs." Madsen clarified. It is revealing how deeply woven exploitation remains within the music industry, in the fact that Madsen was still taken advantage of, even when working with a label that aimed to provide aspiring female artists with access to opportunities.

In addition, the shallow nature of the music industry limits the opportunities of female artists based on the false stereotypes they are expected to live up to. The media oversexualizes women, promoting unattainable beauty standards, consequently limiting access to opportunities for those who don't adhere to these standards. In NPR's *Beyond Representation: In Music And Media, Gender Equality Will Take A Revolution*, Skolnik addresses the music industry's biased and confining behavior toward women, by proposing, "How well can one exploit another if one does not see that other as wholly human?" (NPR) The normalization of treating women as objects is especially disheartening to aspiring artists like Madsen, who want to share their art and their message with the world but fear discriminatory treatment; leading her to believe she will not have a place in the music industry unless she creates it for herself. While women's musical success is inherently interconnected with their image, men are praised solely for their musical accomplishments. "I don't know what most male artists look like," Madsen explained. "I know nothing about them outside of the music that they are producing."

However, the growth and integration of feminism within mainstream popular culture provides an opportunity for female artists to speak out against the sexism embedded within the music industry. The refusal of female musicians to adhere to physical stereotypes has become an

increasingly widespread message, portrayed in songs such as Lady Gaga's *Plastic Woman*, and Dua Lipa's *Boys will be Boys*. On Taylor Swift's album *Folklore*, her song *Mad Woman* illustrates the demeaning reactions society has to women rejecting physical norms. In 2022, almost every hit album released by a female musician had at least one track directly or indirectly addressing sexism. (The Miscellany News)

Whether or not the music industry will continue confining women to their physical appearance plays a large role in Madsen's decision to pursue a music career. Female musicians encounter more biased and misogynistic settings than inclusive ones, particularly when playing live events. Madsen recalls feeling "very much perceived as a young woman," threatened by drunken older men who have no respect for personal boundaries, when playing gigs. (Madsen) Although Madsen doesn't let safety concerns stop her from pursuing opportunities to play her music live, it is an aspect of performing she always has to consider.

Despite the challenges Madsen has faced in her lifelong journey with music, from industry demands, school pressures, and impending career decisions, she manages to find a way to stay true to what she loves—self-expression, performing, creativity—music and songwriting in their raw forms. When asked what she wants to pursue in college and beyond, she has often considered music therapy, or becoming a songwriter, like her musical inspiration Carole King. However, she knows that no matter what, she will be doing something musical because she finds value and joy in it.

"Music is such a personal journey." She remarked. "The cool thing about music is that you can be as musical as makes sense for you....my dad always told me, you can say you're a musician, but you're not a professional till you get paid. And that's true. But you don't need to be

a professional, and you don't need to have achieved the highest level of something, to still be able to do it.” (Madsen)

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