

Rock 'n' Roll Goes to School in Columbia

By John Hendel

THIS SPRING, the Academy of Rock at Hickman High School in Columbia celebrates its fifth anniversary with its annual Battle of the Bands scheduled tentatively on May 7 at The Blue Note in downtown Columbia. This revolutionary club advocates rock 'n' roll, a musical form traditionally associated with rebellion and its companions, sex and drugs. At Hickman, the club has gone mainstream and, along with student government and National Honor Society, has been consistently ranked as one of the top clubs for student involvement, with 5-10 percent of the student body involved in the Academy in some way in a school of 2,100 people.

These musical enthusiasts are just as likely to be high-achievers as jaded slackers or rebels, and genres covered by the club range from electronica to alternative country, blues to pure rock.

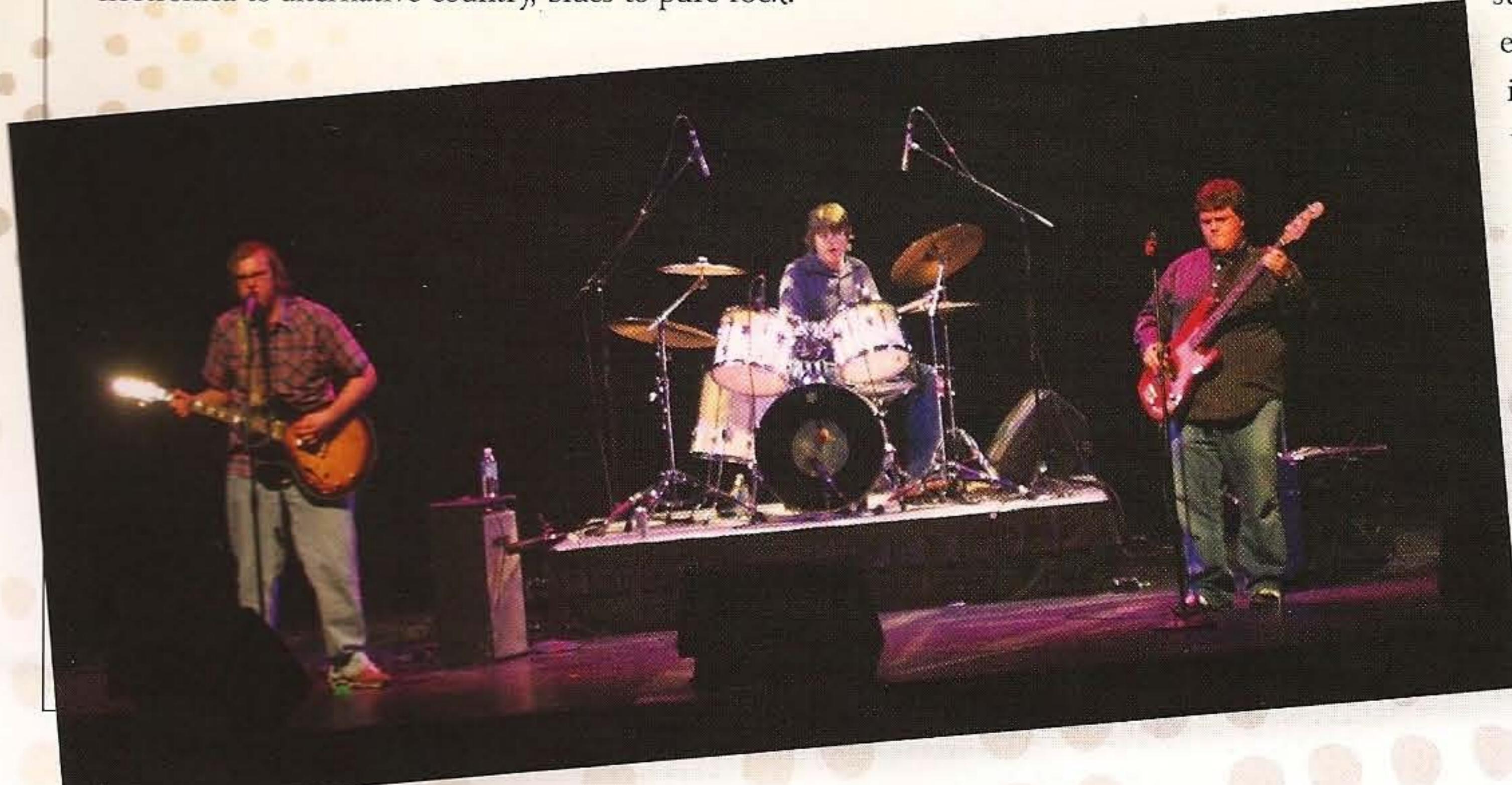
THE BATTLE AND THE TIPPER GORES

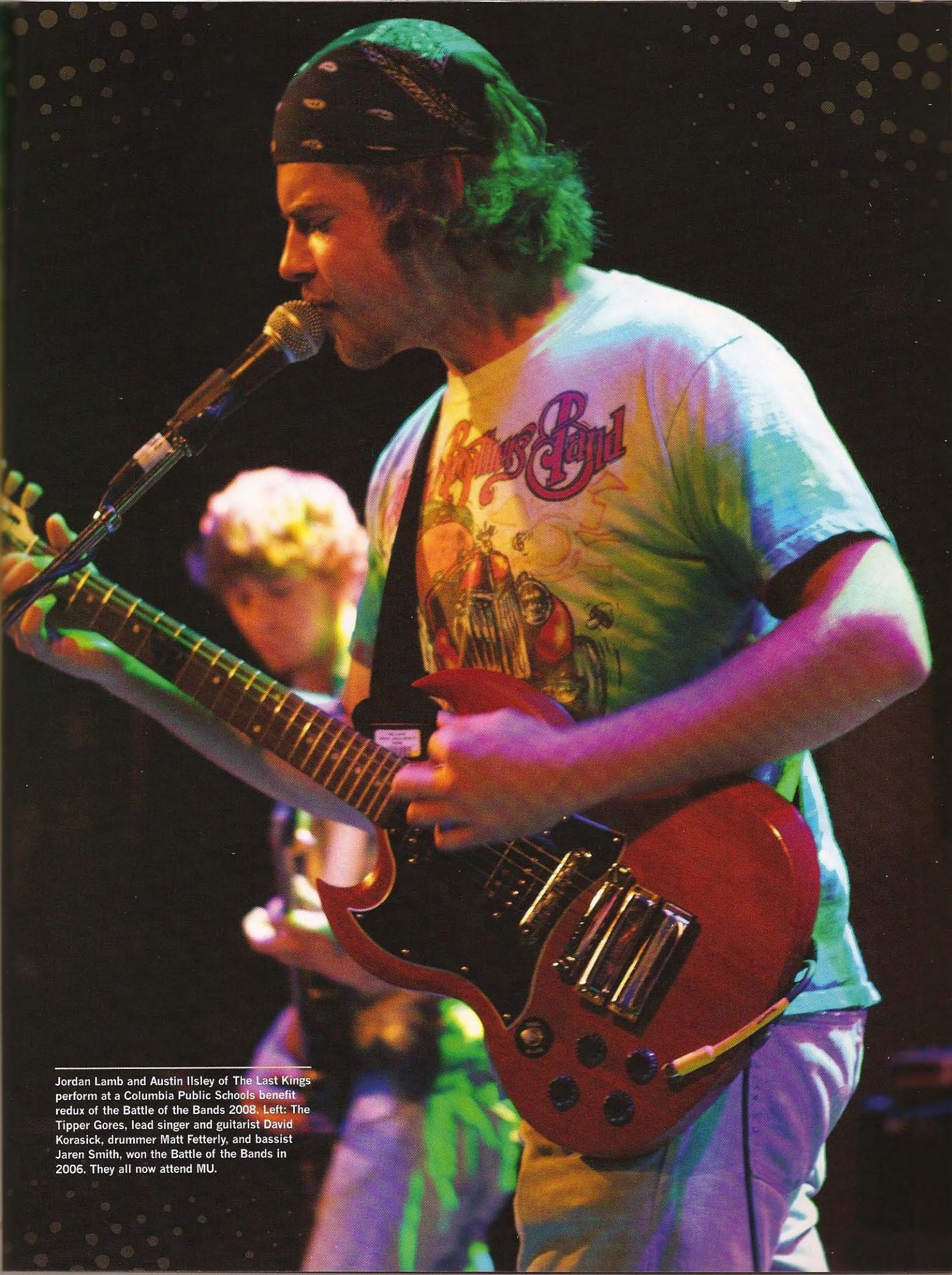
Hundreds of students stared up at the four-piece band, composed of high school seniors, competing in the second Battle of the Bands. The lead singer of The Tipper Gores, David Korasick, with shaggy hair, big sneakers, and shorts, strummed his guitar and sang for fifty seconds before the drummer started banging and the crowd went wild.

Entry price that evening was three bucks to see eight high school bands from Columbia gather in Hickman's auditorium to compete for recording time and a Golden Guitar trophy. A year-end celebration of high school musical talent of any and all genres, whether rock or rap, ska or blues, this event is the blazing fire beneath the Academy of Rock.

The Tipper Gores won that second year, and David recalls great surprise as well as appreciation for the eight-hundred-dollar prize of recording time. The band is the first Battle winner that is still performing together. The first three Battle of the Bands happened in Hickman's auditorium, while the last two took place at The Blue Note, a central music venue in downtown Columbia.

Today, The Tipper Gores attend the University of Missouri and remain active in the Columbia music scene, playing concerts at venues such as Mojo's and The Blue Fugue.





Jordan Lamb and Austin Ilsley of The Last Kings perform at a Columbia Public Schools benefit redux of the Battle of the Bands 2008. Left: The Tipper Gores, lead singer and guitarist David Korasick, drummer Matt Fetterly, and bassist Jaren Smith, won the Battle of the Bands in 2006. They all now attend MU.



IN THE BEGINNING

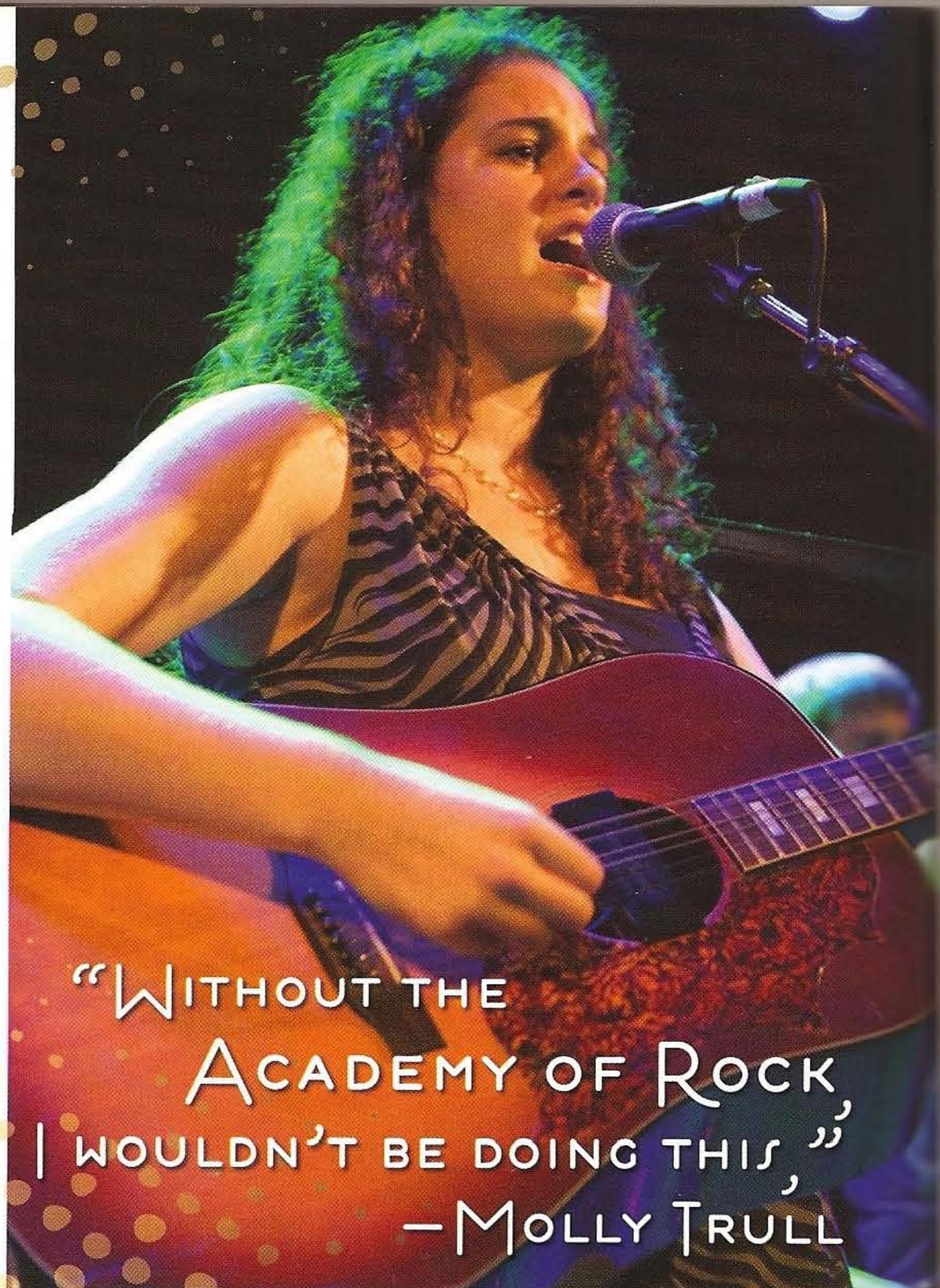
In the beginning in 2004, word spread fast among the students: *A club for rock 'n' roll? Popular music? Really?* A few passionate students and teachers were involved in the club's start, remembers then-sophomore Anne Shifley, later a club officer. They recruited from personal networks and people they thought would be enthusiastic about music, who wanted to talk, watch documentaries, and sometimes play, though playing was not a requirement.

Two juniors, David Kemper and Dylan Raithel, triggered the Academy of Rock's formation in the class of their English teacher, Phil Overeem. They approached Phil, also an obsessive music fanatic, and told him they should form a music club together. David and his musical friends had trouble booking shows; he proposed a Battle of the Bands between Hickman and Rock Bridge high schools. The Battle has been between the two schools ever since.

The Academy of Rock's first club meeting took place on February 4, 2004, and within three months, the first Battle occurred, attracting 550 people, earning \$1,700, and costing only \$66 for the judges' pizza. This helped solve David's booking problem. Venue owners realized that an Academy booking would summon a horde of impassioned kids.

The Academy of Rock turned David into one of what he calls the fortunate few who enjoyed their high school experience. Class was never his thing, but David and Phil worked together as equals for David's remaining year and a half at Hickman. The club took off. Everyone lived and breathed the Academy, David says. An organization emerged without effort. "Everything seemed so easy at the time," he recalls with a smile now at age twenty-one.

David still plays his acoustic guitar every day, keeps in touch with Phil, and says Hickman will always be his home. He is still playing around Columbia, working odd jobs as he works on his music.



THE POD PEOPLE

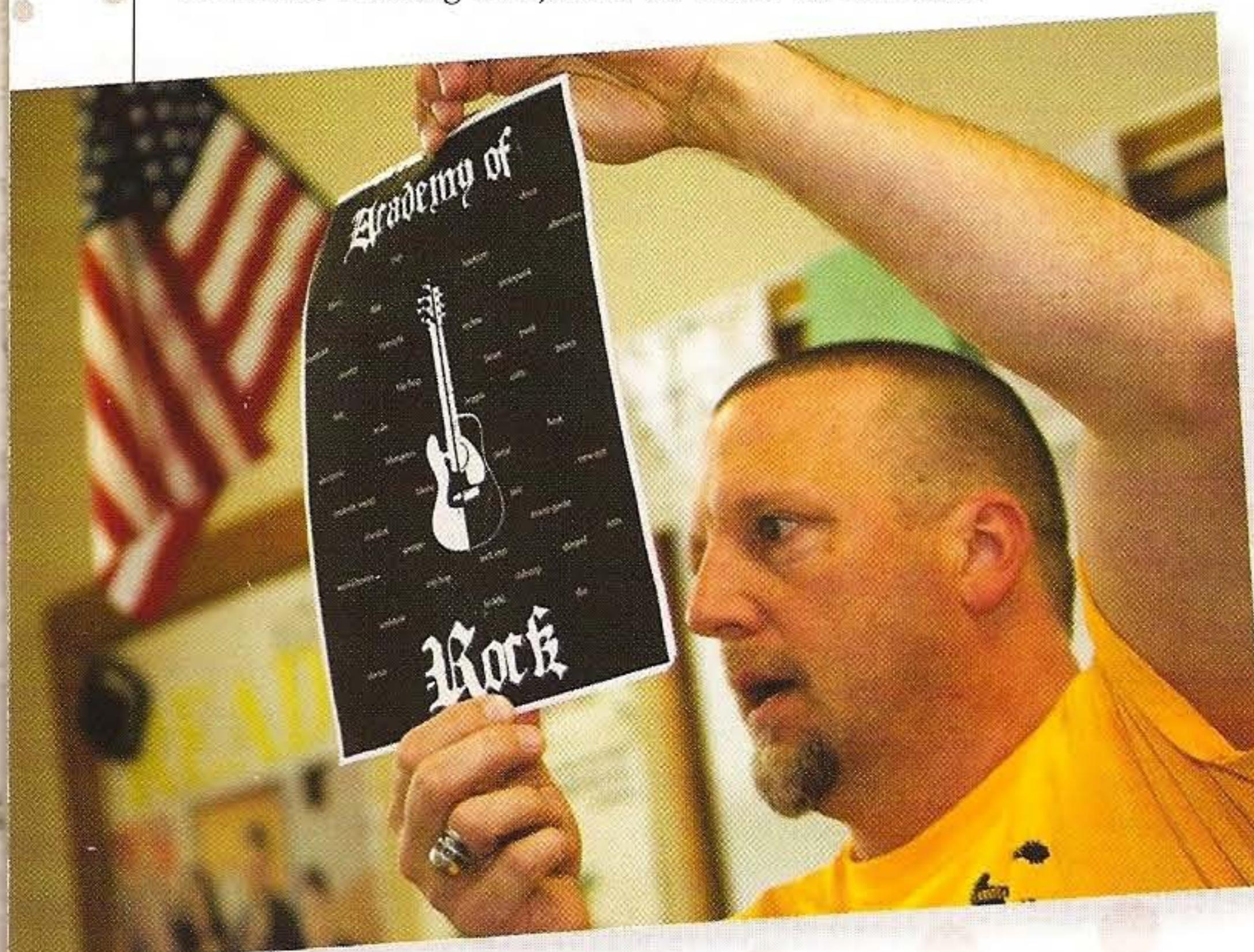
Bluesy tones kick off the podcast, entitled *Rock Therapy*, this one dated December 16, 2008, and the vocals are immediately ear-catching: "I don't need a doctor, I don't need a pill..." Johnny Burnette and the Rock and Roll Trio sing, "I need rock therapy."

The music cuts out as another voice, that of host Phil Overeem, enters, "Welcome to the landmark fiftieth edition of *Rock Therapy*, Hickman High School's musical podcast, and since we're all home on a snow day today, it's only appropriate I prepare a little holiday podcast."

The music continues.

Phil, the charismatic Academy of Rock sponsor in his mid-forties, has continued to expand the Academy of Rock in the years since it began, fifty music podcasts being just one example. Phil wants students involved in podcasting, which they sometimes are, but training slows the process. He has a history of rocking out in bands in the '80s, and podcasting helps channel his own musical mania, dating back to his Carthage childhood.

Phil Overeem promotes the annual Battle of the Bands to club members at the monthly meeting. The meetings are usually followed by documentaries.





Cooper Livingston is the life-force behind Carbon Brainchild, and he has also backed Molly Trull and Anodyne. He plays for a crowd at The Blue Note at Columbia in 2008. Cooper now attends the University of Missouri at Columbia.

ACADEMY | DOLS

"... so let me shut up and welcome ..." said Phil, decked out in his black Dead Moon T-shirt and standing on stage at Hickman's Little Theatre with Exene Cervenka.

Exene, a red-haired fifty-two-year-old musician and former lead singer of the punk band X, wore a black dress when she came to Hickman last April. She read poetry, played guitar, and answered questions.

Rows of students—tie-dye and backward caps, preps and longhaired slacker stereotypes, all present—filled the theater seats, ready to clap and ask questions of the music legend.

Academy members meet the first Monday of each month to help plan these events. Most outsiders start paying attention when they hear who the Academy has attracted over the past half decade—Exene, the Drive-By Truckers, Bobby Rush, The Hold Steady, and Baby Gramps—to perform and advise young Academy members. Local bands, such as Bockman, the F* Bombs, and Amsterband (now Ha Ha Tonka), have also performed.

Phil usually sends initial e-mails to press agents in order to get national acts such as the Drive-By Truckers and The Hold Steady. His success in booking comes as much from tenacity as any networking or music friends. The successes overshadow the many quiet, failed band requests.

Visiting musical artists have always performed for free with the exception of Baby Gramps, a one-man operation on a shoestring budget. The Academy scraped together three hundred dollars to pay for his performance at the Little Theatre.

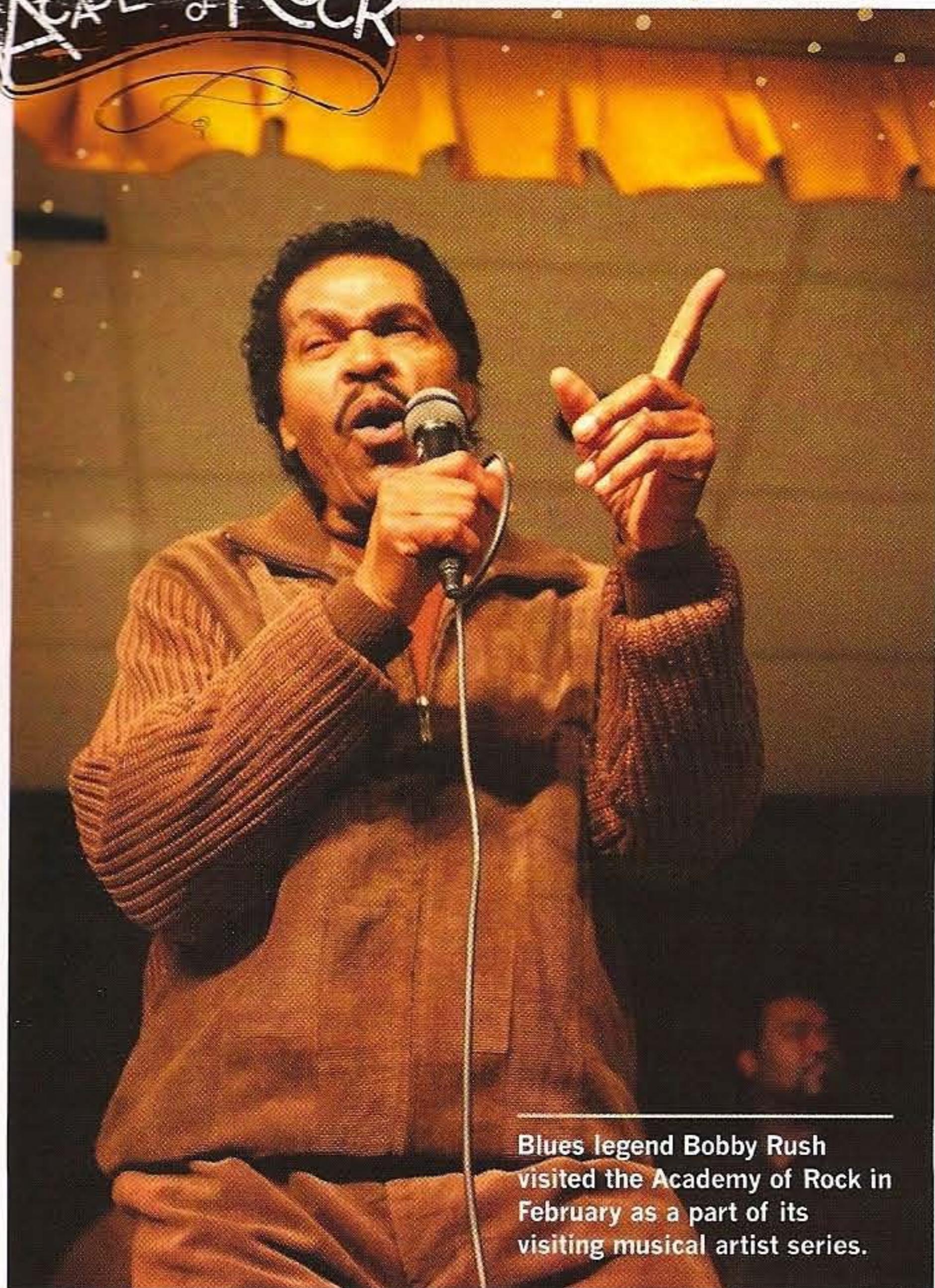
MOLLY TRULL AND ANODYNE

"I love Baby Gramps!" Molly Trull exclaims. "He's the nicest guy."

The eighteen-year-old was one of the students Phil arranged to chauffeur Baby Gramps last February when the steel guitar player of more than forty years performed for Hickman and also at Columbia's True/False documentary film festival. Academy members meet and greet guest musicians entering town, sometimes picking up and escorting the artists.

The Academy helped channel a nascent passion for music that was exploding when Molly hit her junior year. Voice lessons, songwriting, and opportunities to perform through the Academy opened up new paths for this initially shy girl who had once rocked out to Broadway musicals rather than the murder ballads she's fond of writing these days.

Singing in a five-piece band called Molly Trull and Anodyne, she won the fifth Battle of the Bands just before her graduation. Given her



Blues legend Bobby Rush visited the Academy of Rock in February as a part of its visiting musical artist series.

recent achievements—more than twenty original songs, performances at Hickman's lunch concerts, a Kewpie Idol event, and the Battle win—she has earned the admiration of both Phil and Academy co-sponsor Brock Boland, another English teacher a decade younger than Phil. They say she could have a future if she pursued music.

Her band's violinist, a Washington University-bound girl named Rachel Zemke, joined the Academy because that's what all the cool kids did. She became a club officer, a loose designation in a group known since its founding for its fluid and open organization.

Molly's parents knew of Phil's good qualities since he taught Molly at Smithton Middle School, and they had heard of the Academy of Rock before their daughter entered high school. They encouraged her to join.

MULTIMEDIA GIVEAWAYS

One fall day, nearly twenty students gathered in Hickman's Little Theatre at 4 PM. Phil stood on the stage, pleased with the turnout. He expected as few as three or four members—the hard core punk fans—to come.

A concert-footage documentary about Bad Brains, a black punk band from Washington, D. C., was about to begin. The crowd reflected the band; some wore T-shirts adorned with punk bands from before their time. Phil announced he would give away a CD and a copy of the film, which he purchased and afterward donated.

"This is gonna blow your mind," mullet-haired Garrett Bacon, a hard core loyal, whispered to his friend before the film. "This is gonna make you explode."

These documentary showings happen about once a month. A serious streak affects Phil when he says he wishes that there were more people at the documentaries, that he had more money for the club, that he could offer pizza to his fellow music fans at these events. Most of the money raised at the club's main fundraiser, the Battle of the Bands, pays for the Battle prize (recording time), upgrades to the club's sound equipment, and other incidentals.

FACE TIME ON FACEBOOK

Beyond Phil's innate charisma and rock spontaneity exists a shrewd awareness of himself, the students, and the virtue of credibility and marketing. His openness to innovation led to the creation and oversight of the Academy of Rock Facebook group, a forum students check more than e-mail and one capable of promoting the many Academy events.

"Facebook was probably one of the smartest choices," says Brock, the club's co-sponsor who started the forum last year. He acknowledges the controversial nature of teachers getting involved but thinks the site is a great facilitator. Brock maintains a policy of not requesting student friendship on Facebook but remains open to requests from them.

Brock calls Phil a mentor and "so meticulous. He really does think of everything." This includes monitoring the club's Wikipedia entry and ensuring that student e-mails sent to request bands reflect the professional aim of the Academy—good grammar, links to articles on the Academy, and a polite tone.

LIKE A REVOLUTION

"The most surprising thing about the Academy of Rock is that it works," says Tim Trull, an MU psychology professor and Molly's father. "There are so many reasons why it shouldn't."

The whole family says they wish other schools could start their own Academies but question the feasibility without a "Mr. O" involved. Stories about Phil and David's planning still echo in Hickman hallways.

"Mr. Overeem's in charge, but it's not like he's micromanaging everything," Tim says. "The average person would think, 'Oh, you've got these teenagers, they wouldn't be able to get it together.'"

"They're kind of disorganized by nature, most of the people involved," says his wife, Meg.

"But I think there's a spirit, too, with Mr. Overeem of this DIY stuff—do it yourself." Tim sits back and thinks, then mentions one of Phil's favorite bands. "The Minutemen created indie music, and if you want it done, you've got to do it yourself. For me, it seems what this is."

Molly laughs. "It's like a revolution."

"Look at Molly's band," Meg says. "Those kids are super achievers. They're not rock 'n' roll rebels." The band's lineup, incidentally, includes both the incoming and outgoing student government presidents and a National Merit Scholar.

"Are we posers?" Molly asks playfully.

"No, you're just really great musicians," Meg says.

"And also," Tim speaks up softly, "everyone's accepted, whether you're a geek and you really like the music or you're a stoner and can't play music. You're in the club."

Visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_H._Hickman_High_School#Clubs for more information.