

# VOX

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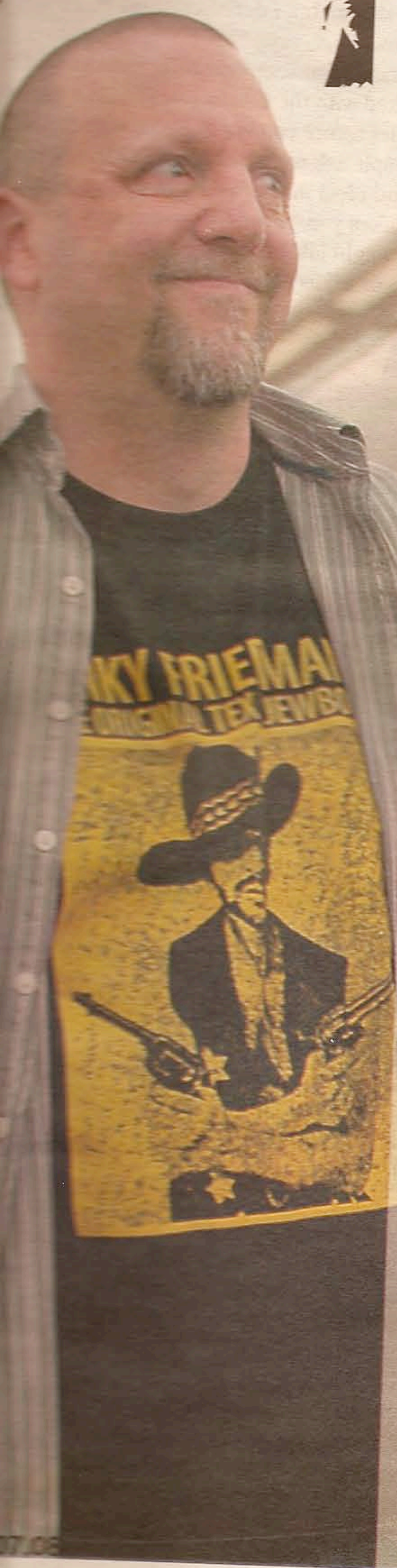
# A new

# SCHOOL OF ROCK

Hickman teacher **Phil Overeem** preaches the virtues of literature, independence and Bob Dylan

# RIGHT (I'M ONLY) TEACHING

US: JOHN HOOK  
JOHN HENDEL



## PHIL OVEREEM, music minister-at-large keeps the rock 'n' roll soul alive for an incoming class of novice performers

Phil Overeem doesn't care for concerts much these days, especially those where no one dances, but this is a special night. He leans against the bar at The Blue Note and chats with his wife, Nicole, but his eyes keep turning to the stage. The Drive-By Truckers, a hip, alternative Southern rock band, is playing its heart out, yet Overeem keeps remembering its acoustic concert at Hickman High School just hours earlier — one he had arranged.

The Drive-By Truckers slow into an instrumental break and pull Overeem from his reverie.

"We want to dedicate this song to the new friends we made at Hickman High School," frontman Patterson Hood shouts to the crowd. "They got a program there kinda like *School of Rock*, maybe a little better. ... Everybody there just knocked me out, and it was an honor to play for them today. So we wanna dedicate this one to them. I think they're called the Academy of Rock! And I like that! I like that a lot!"

Overeem breathes in the words, the performance, the passion and the memories. This is one of the finest moments of his life.

### THE ACADEMY OF ROCK

Music permeates Overeem's life and always has. That particular night happened back in March 2005 and marked the first national music act he and Academy of Rock co-sponsor Brock Boland brought to Hickman.

Overeem, 45, teaches five classes on British literature as well as a class on American pop music. He's been teaching for 24 years, but more importantly, he preaches the holy ministry of rock 'n' roll. A shade short of six feet tall and slightly bald, he casts an imposing figure, but his quick smile and bright eyes reveal his warmth.

Overeem loves teaching and spurns elitism. His favorite book is the satirical, New Orleans-set *A Confederacy of Dunces*, by John Kennedy Toole, and his top musical artists include Bob Dylan, Thelonious Monk

and the Minutemen, though he's also quick to mention new favorites such as Arcade Fire. In any moment of silence, odds are nine-to-one he has a song in his head.

Phil Overeem does not think he's cool.

"You can't think you're cool, or you automatically aren't," Overeem says. "Plus, cool is just another commercial overripe for commercial exploitation anyway."

Overeem's extracurricular work with music is what distinguishes him from other teachers. He formed the Academy of Rock in 2004, which defies its casual description as a music club. It all began with a student named David Kemper, who asked Overeem to sponsor a student music club.

"I'll do it if you're serious," Overeem told him. "I don't want to sit around to just talk about music till 4:15. ... If you have an idea, I'll do it."

Kemper had more than an idea: He had a band, and he bantered with his Rock Bridge High School friends about whose bands were better. The clear answer was a band called The Tipper Gore.

"That's concrete," Overeem agreed. "I'm in."

This sparked the creation of the Academy of Rock and the annual Battle of the Bands. There have been five battles so far: three at Hickman and the most recent one at The Blue Note.

The first battle in 2004 drew 550 people, earned \$1,700 and only cost \$66. Overeem filters that profit to the Academy and to the winning band. The battle's winner receives several hundred dollars to record music with local Red Boots Studio.

An alternative-country band called The Tipper Gore won in 2005 and received \$800 of recording time — \$400 raised from the battle, which Red Boots owner then matched. David Korasick, Gores' frontman, calls Overeem an integral part of the success of the battle and the Academy.

"Mr. Overeem basically does it all," Korasick says. "Even though he probably wouldn't take credit for it."



Phil Overeem is not just a preacher of music. He also teaches that school is cool. "I remember when I was in high school, it wasn't cool to be involved in school," says his wife Nicole Overeem. "And I'm glad to see that's changing."

## THE REVEREND IS BORN

Overeem never could play any instruments — the great tragedy and irony of his life — but turning down the chance to jam with his best friends was impossible.

Rock matters.

As a 22-year-old first-year teacher in Springfield, he often raced to Fayetteville, Ark., to rock out with his college pals in the garage rock band Wayne Coomers and the Original Sins.

The name came from a mistaken phone call asking for a Mr. Wayne Coomers, and the band seized it. Overeem donned the title of Reverend Wayne Coomers and sang many of the band's songs. More than 300 people were present for the band's 1984 living room debut.

This set, which featured covers such as Talking Heads' "Psycho Killer" and R.E.M.'s "Radio-Free Europe," as well as originals such as "Call Me Back," was repeated four times and lasted past 3 a.m. Despite the 150 high schoolers awaiting Overeem's lessons on Monday morning, the weekend was worth it.

## STIRRING THE CONGREGATION

Performance is essential for Overeem. People need the courage to rock.

He wants student bands to play and students to hear big names such as the Drive-By Truckers and The Hold Steady, who entertained Academy members in December 2006. Other musicians such as the F\*Bombs, Amsterband and Witch's Hat have also played for students.

The Academy arranges for student musicians to perform every Friday during lunch. This feeds into its partnership with the Ragtag Cinema, which lets students play there once a month, thereby energizing the music scene before May's Battle of the Bands.

"He works harder than any other teacher I know," says MU student Anne Shifley, 20, whom Overeem taught in both middle and high school. "He's passionate about his teaching and music, and when he combines the two, he's virtually unstoppable. Mr. O has inspired many students who were struggling academically to regain control of their education."

She took Overeem's music class as a senior and called him not only a mentor but also someone she could talk to about anything.

Dr. Wanda Brown, the assistant superintendent of Columbia Public Schools, always sought out Overeem's classroom as a source for excellent teaching. She was the assistant principal at Hickman when Overeem first taught there and saw him teach over their years together at Smithton Middle School. When the administrative stress built up, Brown, a "Phil Overeem fan from the start," wandered toward his room.

"One of my favorite things to do, whether at Smithton or Hickman, was to stand at Phil's door and be reminded what it's all about," Brown says. "I think many people feel that way."

Karen Downey, a retired special education teacher and Overeem's teaching partner of 14 years, calls him a natural-born teacher. She recalls how he brought murder ballads to his high school class and a whole unit on Chuck Berry to his middle school class. "When you think of Phil Overeem," Downey says, "you think of music."

## THE MAN COMES AROUND

Sometimes Overeem pours so much of his own life into his congregation that it's easy to forget where he came from: Carthage, where he dreamed about a career as a sports statistician. That dream ended when saved lunch money translated into the 1978 issue of *Rolling Stone* emblazoned with Springsteen on the cover. This began his obsession. An honors English class at the University of Arkansas forced Overeem to read a book a week, a "baptism of hell" that turned him into a literature nut. Teaching became his new passion.

He completed his English education degree at Missouri State University and continued to teach high school in

Springfield for the next six years. In 1990, he met Nicole and swept her away with his enthusiasm and rebellious streak. A relationship blossomed, and the two have been married for 15 years. Nicole teaches special education.

Nowadays, Overeem and Nicole generally wake up at 4:45 a.m., walk their mutt, Candy, and head to school shortly before 7 a.m. Once they're back, music fills the house until they sleep. They grade assignments and listen and sometimes take a break to watch their favorite shows.

Nicole says snoring is the reverend's only sin. "His best quality is that he's honest," she says. "He's accepting of pretty much everything and everyone. He works to see the good."

Nine years ago, Overeem started a music Web site called The First Church of Holy Rock and Roll. It featured sermons about The Velvet Underground and homilies called "How Rock 'n' Roll Saved My Life!" He misses preaching the ministry of rock there but found better ways to channel what he calls "this whole torrent of opinion I had about music stored up."

The past three years led to his best platform for preaching the benefits of rock, though that platform ended up being an academy rather than a church.

## THE GOD OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

The Academy of Rock reaches deep and now fills many functions beyond the Battle of the Bands.

The club boasts the American Roots Music Listening Library in Hickman's Media Center, which contains more than 400 CDs students can listen to. The Academy raised more than \$1,000 for reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina by showing two New Orleans documentaries at Ragtag and holding a dance party at The Blue Note.

The reverend makes "Rock Therapy" podcasts to muse about music. Overeem and a KCOU DJ also developed

KCOU Takeover Day, where different pairs of students guest DJ for a day, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The Academy shows a music documentary once a month after school. In September 2007, nearly 20 students — burgeoning hipsters in Ramones and The Clash T-shirts — gathered in Hickman's Little Theater at 4 p.m. to watch a Bad Brains documentary.

Standing outside the theater, Overeem chatted about why he doesn't use as much music in his English classes as some might expect; it's the same reason he rarely teaches *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

"If someone pissed on a Bob Dylan song, it wouldn't make me mad at the student," Overeem says. "It would hurt me. It'd be like someone insulted my wife. ... I'm an American music chauvinist, unashamedly. All this stuff about who we are, what we're doing and where we need to go is encoded in that music."

An older teacher named Rod McHugh sports a flashy cowboy hat and strolls down the hall with a big grin directed at Overeem.

"He is the god of rock 'n' roll!" McHugh calls out as he walks on.

## IMAGINE

Phil Overeem has never left the U.S., but he has explored a world hidden in sound. His identity as Reverend Wayne Coomers lasted for another 10 shows in the '80s. The band's picture appeared in *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* magazine once, though without any caption or name.

The group's last show, what Overeem calls the worst failure in rock history, happened in 1986 and took over the Ozark Mountain Smokehouse with three electric guitars, two drummers and the indomitable spirit of rock. "It was just unholy, terrible noise," Overeem says. "But all in all, it was really fun. That feeds into my feelings on the

★ ★ ★  
SOMEONE PISSED ON A BOB DYLAN SONG, IT WOULD HURT ME  
AND AT THE STUDENT, IT WOULD HURT ME  
"

Academy of Rock, that kids need to be fearless and get up and hone their chops. ... I had a blast being in that band, even though we were terrible."

Nothing gets Overeem more excited than the subject of Hickman students forming bands and taking risks. He loves that Hickman has the raw musical talent to showcase 10 new bands in a row. That attitude characterizes his own life and guides his work with the Academy. He's not trying to live his life through these kids — he simply believes in bringing passion for music to the public school environment.

"There is also a monster inside me that cannot stand being kept from sharing everything it knows and feels about music every waking second," Overeem confides. "The students just want to come and see people dance and clap, and then do it again. And it's rewarding to stimulate that."

Overeem regrets not starting an Academy of Rock back in 1984, chalking that up to a lack of balls and imagination at the time. Some days he fantasizes about engaging in the musical activities full-time and getting paid for it because of how much fun he has. His life revolves around his special ministry. He's concerned that some might not see him as a nuts-and-bolts teacher but knows the school supports him. He'll keep listening to music, reading the musicians' biographies and magazines sitting on his nightstand and planning how to expand his Academy.

After all, rock matters. **V**

# I WANT YOUR SIX

Vox accosts performers and music fans with a very sharp pencil and microphone under duress, to answer six questions. Rock minister Phil Overeem answers with his answers.

## 1. What is your favorite album?

Jerry Lee Lewis: *Live at the Star Club, Hamburg, Germany*

## 2. Which album do you wish would spontaneously combust?

Joanna Newsom: *Ys*.

## 3. What's the best live show you have ever seen?

Ray Condo and the Ricochets, Shakespeare's Parking Lot. I'd been raving to friends about this band non-stop for months and dragged several to this performance. By 4 in the morning, after the show, we had played their first two records four times apiece. True test of a great show: When you get home, you HAVE to bust out the records.

## 4. What is your favorite make-out album?

Al Green: *Call Me*.

## 5. What band is so last year?

I neither quit listening to something because it is "so last year" nor start listening to it because it's "so this year." I think the sign that I am in love with a record is when I know I will still be listening to it in five or 10 years.

## 6. Build your dream band.

Piano and vocals: Jerry Lee Lewis; fiddle and vocals: Bob Dylan; rhythm guitar and vocals: Al Green; drums and vocals: James Helm; lead guitar and vocals: Alvin Youngblood Hart; bass and vocals: Me'shell Ndegeocello; harmonica, vocal, and goat gland shots: Bobby Rush; horn section, whistles, sirens, blessings and imprecations: Rahsaan Roland Kirk; conductor, writer oncall, chef: Swamp Dogg.

## FLASHBACK: 1985

Phil Overeem as Wayne Coomers at The Icehouse in Fayetteville, Ark., in 1985. Overeem sang for Wayne Coomers and the Original Sins in the '80s. This photo originally appeared in the long-running punk rock fanzine, *Maximum Rock and Roll*.

