

Who We Are

As a kid, I loved to read; leaving the school library seemed like death to me. I just loved being able to put myself into a different universe, even if it was only for a minute. My favorite author was Shel Silverstein. The poems he made were amazing. I would check out his books every chance I got just to read them over and over again. There was just something about those poems—the way they bent reality and weren't bound to the same rules as my writing—that was amazing. I knew I wanted to be a poet, more specifically a rapper, since I was around 8 years old. I even used to write raps on the back of my worksheets. What I didn't know though was that music would become one of the best things that's ever happened to me.

The biggest problem I had growing up was fitting in. Other kids were interested in sports and were actually very good at them. I, on the other hand, wasn't as physically adept as many of my peers and was always the last to get picked at recess. A prime example of my differences were between my cousin Samuel—Chicken for short—and me. Chicken was a great athlete since birth, it seemed. He loved sports, was good looking, and was always the coolest kid no matter where we went. I wasn't like Chicken in the slightest. I was big, slow, uncoordinated: all things you wouldn't want in an athlete. Every time we would go somewhere I found myself stuck in Chicken's shadow, or rather, unwilling to leave the cocoon I had kept myself in all these years. All those times of not getting to play with Chicken because I was deemed “trash” by the other kids made me not want to be myself.

The collective tears that fell from my eyes weren't enough to drown my woes. I was fat, black, and ugly, and even worse, I couldn't do anything about it. I was a tin can, kicked around by other kids without a fleeting sense of regret. In my head, I was desperate for the approval of everyone. I never understood that maybe what I actually needed was my own approval.

In the summer of seventh grade, I began to see that music is beautiful; it transcends trivial things like color and status. For me, music was my savior. In eighth grade, I started to notice myself changing. I stopped liking to go to places, including school. Even football, which I once thought I'd make a career out of, became boring for me. I began to change into nothing more than a hollow shell. I was depressed; I turned to self-harm to distract myself from my problems, waiting for night to come so I could indulge myself in my nihilistic behavior. This way of life was all I knew, and as each day passed visions of the light at the end of tunnel faded even more. I had abandoned my hobbies, and by early ninth grade, I had completely lost my will to live.

Just as I was going to give up, I started to get back into music. I wrote about how I felt, how hopeless it seemed to continue. My fears, regrets, and aspirations poured from my soul outward into the confines of the paper. I wanted to chronicle my experiences at the least, but it turned into something greater than that. Throughout the year, I still struggled with depression and self-loathing, although I stopped cutting for good. But now it was different. Now I had something that helped me bear the weight that had been crushing me all these years. I would rap everywhere I went: school; park benches; buses. I freestyled no matter what I was doing because I etched into my mind that I was real artist, or at least was going to be a real artist, and nothing was going to stop me.

I still fought with the sadness, but I used music to get myself as far away from myself as I could, and it started to work. I even began playing guitar and piano, and making beats, or at least

learning how. I was deep into music when I saw my first personal live performance, it was Lauryn Hill in Maine (a small venue)—an amazing show. Seeing the heart and soul she put into the show shook me to my core. She had an entire band at her command, a general ordering an army of instruments whose mission was to tell stories. The group catalogued her life experiences with each note. It was then that I realized that music was more than sound: it was life, passion, pain, joy, ecstasy. Each strum of her guitar was an antidepressant; every bassline a therapy session. People at that show weren't confined to their bodies anymore, at this show, souls met one another in their purest form and immersed themselves in the love and hope Ms Hill was providing. Music was no longer just sounds arranged in a pleasing order; music was art, and this art was beautiful, and what's more, people didn't have to strive to fit in. As the years progressed, I continued to express myself the best I could, and it made me happy. It's because of this that I know when people accept and embrace who they are, joy will come of it. To this day, I believe we should all love who we are, and not try to change a thing.