

Rhythm

&

Roots

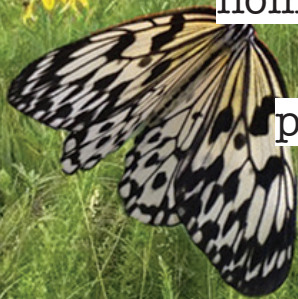


hometown nostalgia

often

plants itself

in music





Hometowns are an integral part of almost every adolescence. Many people spend time reminiscing over the nostalgia for the place they called home and the people they connected with during their childhood. Those who are musically inclined tend to draw inspiration from their hometown, whether intentionally or not.

Ella Stevens, a junior at Interlochen Arts Academy, is majoring in songwriting. Native to Charlotte, North Carolina, and a frequent Asheville visitor, she makes Americana folk-rock music. Stevens calls it “country, but not quite country.”

“Asheville influenced me more [than Charlotte] since most of my family is from there,” Stevens said. “There’s a lot of bluegrass and folk [music]. Being in Asheville and being around so much bluegrass made me really interested in the ‘Americana’ genre.”

While some songwriters are influenced by their hometown in terms of the lyrics they write, others are influenced by their mentality. One of these people is Disha Kumar, a Mountain View High School senior who sings and plays the violin. She’s part of her school’s orchestra and choir, where her peers inspire her to put time into her skills.

“I would say that since Mountain View is such a competitive place in every aspect,

it’s pushed me to fulfill my best capabilities,” Kumar said. “That’s how I’ve gotten so dedicated to my craft. I’m just trying to show my dedication to music.”

Different artists can be motivated by the same area in different ways. Mariam Kubursi, a senior at Gunn High School, loves to make music. She creates soft-pop songs, with the occasional detour to country. Kubursi pulls inspiration

from Palo Alto to create her own unique stories.

“Palo Alto is a very simple area, but when I try to write music, I try to be as intricate as I can,” Kubursi said. “Palo Alto’s a good blank slate, but it also gives me a lot to work with. I take what I have, interpret it, and spit it back out again with more details.”

For other artists, living in their hometowns has shaped the subject matter of their songs. Charlotte Zabel is a junior at Oakwood School in Los Angeles who enjoys making indie-pop music, though her genre fluctuates sometimes. In Zabel’s music, she finds herself leaning towards writing about more niche topics.

“There’s a wide range of options around me when it comes to music,” Zabel said. “When I’m trying to find something new to write about, I find myself drawn to materialism and Hollywood. What constitutes a ‘valuable’ life or job influences me because I see it a lot.”

Similarly, Kumar appreciates the music scene of her hometown. Beyond just the popular genres in an area, Kumar finds that experiences with specific songs and artists can tie them to a location. This comes naturally for her as she often attends open mics and other live music events with her friends.

“One of the last

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songs I sang with my friends was ‘True Blue’ by Boygenius,” Kumar said. “I associate that song pretty heavily with Mountain View because now, every time I listen to it, I think of all the places we’ve performed together.”

Also, Zabel is interested in the simple things in life that people see every day, such as high school. Due to the lack of high school-aged celebrities, there are only a few popular songs that accurately represent a teenage perspective. Zabel

finds joy in writing about the things she has a connection with on a day-to-day basis, such as an average day at school.

“I wrote a song called ‘Passing Period,’ and I realized that it’s kind of cool because all students can connect and relate to it,” Zabel said. “I write a lot about school and experiences at school. I think that adds personality to my songs, and it helps me when I’m stuck.”

On the same note, Stevens is influenced by her natural surroundings, such as the North Carolina mountains and the forests of Interlochen Arts Academy.

“Since my music is a lot more ‘campfire-side,’ it has more natural imagery,” Stevens said. “The way I tell stories has a lot to do with the specific environment and where I am when I write them.”

Instead of the natural surroundings around her, Kubursi finds inspiration from her childhood home. From the paint to the smell of the house, each unique aspect creeps its way into her lyrics. Past just nostalgia, the sentiment of more recent years is a huge inspiration.

“My sisters and I grew up in the house, and there’s so many things that show we’ve lived here for so long and grew up here,” Kubursi said. “Going to college next year, I’ve been talking about my house more. It’s that bittersweet feeling of leaving and trying to grab onto as many things as I can and put them in my songs so I can remember how it feels.”

In the same way geographical surroundings can be vital to songwriting, the specific people who live in a musician’s hometown are important. Whether directly or indirectly, the people a musician surrounds themselves with change how they perceive their work. Communities can also serve as role models for musicians, not just inspiration.

“I have so many people who I can learn from when it comes to making music,” Kumar said. “A big factor in how I’ve made music is that I’ve watched other people do it. I’ve learned directly from the music spheres I’m in.”

Experimenting with instruments also personalizes a song to the artist’s unique style. Kubursi mainly produces pop music, but she frequently tries out different instruments.

“I try to incorporate my love of piano and random instruments—things you wouldn’t normally hear in pop,” Kubursi said. “I used an organ in ‘Harder Than the Rain.’ I want them [interesting instruments] to make an appearance because it’s taking what everyone knows and adding your own sprinkle of style.”

Being around other songwriters can produce a feeling of solidarity about the art behind creating music, such as finding similarities in how they produce music.

“My music gives me a lot more empathy and insight into how other writers look at the world because I’m more curious about other people’s lives,” Zabel said.

Another influential part of songwriting is the artist’s community. For Kumar, it’s the choir and orchestra. For Stevens, it’s the community in Asheville.

“It [music] just brings everyone together—that’s what makes it really special and unique to where I live,” Stevens said.

Though the Americana music scene is very supportive, other, more stressful environments can be equally beneficial for creativity.

“At Mountain View High School, our choir is very dedicated and competitive, so a lot of people are trying to get involved

in as many ways as they can,” Kumar said. “Sometimes, that can be a little stressful, but I think of it as a privilege.”

The communities surrounding music tend to expect one thing that’s tried and true. In an age where so many things have been done, developing original work is challenging.

“Sometimes, I feel limited when it comes to writing or producing songs because I want to make things [music] I know everybody will like,”

Kubursi said. “Sometimes, I’m scared to go above and beyond with my ideas. But, as much as it limits me, it [the limitation] helps me because I know what people like.”

On a similar note, writing about hometowns in a nuanced and creative way can be tricky—it’s all about finding the balance between nostalgia and homesickness. Stevens’ new song, “Mojo” (coming out May 16, 2024), is based on stories

her uncle told her when she was younger. She weaves in appreciation for her family, who impact her music to this day.

“It [Mojo] is about family, music, and how my family has connected me to music, nature, and really everything I do in life,” Stevens said. “A lot of imagery has to do with my home, like my Subaru with stickers of all the mountains I’ve climbed.”

Physical locations that are prevalent in every town also add to the nostalgia of a hometown song. Zabel explained that the way to have listeners

“It feels good to be known so well.”

“True Blue” by boygenius

feel a connection is to describe something in detail so listeners can immerse themselves in the atmosphere.

“When I’m writing about my neighborhood, it’s always helpful to use something concrete you can see,” Zabel said. “Sometimes, I write from someone else’s perspective because it’s much needed when you’re always writing from your perspective.”

Hometowns will always remain in music, no matter how they show up. Someone’s adolescence is a very important passage of time that shapes them for the rest of their life.

“Connecting songs to hometowns is really cool because everybody has one, and all hometowns look a little different and feel a little different,” Zabel said.

While musicians pull inspiration from incredibly varied sections of life, there is always something to feel when reminiscing about one’s childhood experience.

“My hometown pulls me right back in—I can’t escape it,” Stevens said.

“It’s that bittersweet feeling of leaving.”

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Disha Kumar, 12

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Charlotte Zabel, 11

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listen to some songs about hometowns!