

When Michael and I first met sixteen years ago, I asked him what he planned to do after college, and he said, "Become an audio engineer." An infinitely more cool answer than what he actually became: a computer programmer.

Michael had decided to become an audio engineer while he was still in high school. In middle school, he'd started his first band (Burnt Toast), and after a few years of performing at middle school talent shows, for high school bashes, and in friend's garages with a revolving cast of bandmates, his mom brought him a brochure advertising Middle Tennessee State University's renowned audio engineering program and said, "This looks like what you want to do."

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I want to do."

As a teenager, his life revolved around music. In addition to the successive string of garage bands, he played percussion in the marching band and bass in the jazz band. In middle school, he'd discovered grunge, and later he'd gotten into emo - *real* emo, not the watered-down, pop-punk emo wannabes that became popular in the early 2000s, but the underground emo that emerged out of hardcore punk in the 90s. Bands like The Get Up Kids, Jets to Brazil, Hum, and Sunny Day Real Estate. He grew his hair long - all the best rock stars had long hair - and it was so soft and shiny that his friends started calling him Pantene. His parents were proud of his musical endeavors, but they hated his long hair. "If you don't cut it off," his dad would threaten, "then I will."

The first week of college, Michael met the most annoying person he'd ever known, a guy named Patrick, who lived on the same hallway in his dorm. Despite his annoyance, Michael and Patrick ended up in an overlapping circle of friends, and eventually, Michael could tolerate Patrick, then they sort of became friends, and then they decided to start a band together. They added a drummer (Brian) and a bass player (Lee), and Michael's longest running band, Skipping Mad, was born.

Their original practice space - in an old run-down warehouse down by the railroad tracks - had a true struggling band vibe: dirty and smelly with barely-working electricity. At first, they shared a space with another band, but soon they started playing more gigs and practicing more often, so they rented their own space. After a year or so, Patrick and Brian moved into a rental house with a large, finished garage, so they covered the walls with eggshell foam to dampen the sound and turned it into a practice space/recording studio.

Over the years, they were able to record several EPs and one full-length album. Michael and Patrick took songwriting lead, taking turns bringing the band half-written pieces of songs that they would then flesh out into full songs. Maybe Michael would start with a verse and a chorus or Patrick would bring a guitar riff, and then together, the band would mess around with the music to see if they could mold it into something they all liked. Usually, the person who wrote the lyrics would take lead on vocals while the other person was free to experiment with harmonies and counter-vocals. Because all four members of the band had differing musical backgrounds and contrasting tastes in music - Brian preferred heavy metal while Patrick had a singer/songwriter bent - Skipping Mad ended up with an eclectic, hard-to-define sound that some compared to Failure and others to the Beatles. One friend commented that Skipping Mad reminded him of a cross between Tool and REM.

When they released their full-length album, Skipping Mad booked a show at a local club in Murfreesboro and invited some of their favorite local bands to play with them. Skipping Mad had been the headlining band several times before, but since this was their CD release party, it felt different to Michael. The club was packed with friends and fans. Michael remembers feeling excited and hopeful that they could make a go of it - that they had a chance to be a real band.

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When Michael and I first met, we were both performing at a church talent show. He and his brother were scheduled to perform first, and since I was performing second, we began chitchatting backstage. "I'm studying to become an audio engineer," he told me.

Three weeks later, we met again at a church dance on a riverboat. Since neither one of us liked to dance, we stood off to the side, talking - first with a group, then by ourselves, through a few songs, and then the whole night. He told me, "Just this week, I switched my major to computer programming."

"Really? Why?" I asked, a little let down that this cool, guitar-playing, future audio engineer was secretly a computer nerd.

But his answer won me over: "Everyone I know that has gone into audio engineering, all they do now is go around getting people coffee, and to sacrifice like that and to spend two or three years running errands for a studio without much to show for it, well obviously you can't start a family when you're just running around getting people coffee."

Nine months later, we were married. Two years after that, we started a family.

At first, even after we were married, he tried to keep the band going. For the first year, he was still in college, and I supported us both on my full-time salary, even paying the bulk of the recording costs for Skipping Mad's album. We spent several nights a week at the practice space and every weekend at a bar or club. I was his biggest fan, the band's most reliable groupie. I mouthed the words to every song and cringed at their tiniest mistakes - the kind of miniscule mix-ups that only a person who had heard the same song a thousand times could notice.

When I was pregnant with our son Cole, I continued to show up for every rehearsal and performance, hiding in corners to protect my bulging belly from drunken fratboys and second-hand smoke. We hoped that even after Cole was born, we'd be able to keep up the rock star lifestyle. It would probably take a few weeks, maybe months, to adjust, but eventually, we'd figure it out. But the first time we left Cole with a babysitter, he refused to take a bottle and screamed the whole night. "You have a terrible baby," the babysitter announced when we picked him up. After that, Michael kept up the rock star lifestyle alone.

By the time Cole was six months old, Michael had been working a lousy part-time job for a year, but my job still paid the bulk of our bills. I had an hour-long commute, felt exhausted all the time, and longed for more time with my baby boy. "I can't do this anymore," I told Michael. "You can be in a band if you want, but during the day, you have to get a real job."

All of the members of Skipping Mad had been in indecisive limbo for awhile. As recent college graduates, they were struggling to decide the direction they wanted the band to go - either take it seriously, record another album, go on tour... or give it up. When they saw Michael struggling to make up his mind, it was the last straw for them all. Brian announced that he was moving back to Oklahoma, and Michael landed a computer programming job at a startup in Washington, DC.

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I knew within our first few dates that Michael was the man I would marry. How could I not be smitten? He wore Rivers Cuomo glasses, had gorgeous sideburns, and played the guitar in a rock band...

Today, he wears math humor t-shirts, has a full beard, and lets his guitar gather dust in the basement. He looks like a computer programmer.

But he's turned a room in our basement into a practice space, bought one kid a drum set and another a bass, and lectures all three kids about *real* emo on every road trip.

One day recently, Cole announced that he had figured out what he wants to be when he grows up: "A hip-hop star."

"Really?" I asked incredulously, eying my white, middle class, suburban son. "I didn't know you even liked hip-hop."

"I don't, not really," he replied. "Mostly, I want to make the music that's in the background of the songs."

A few days later, recounting the story to Michael, I stopped mid-sentence, understanding crossing my face. "Oh, Michael," I said. "I just realized what Cole wants to be when he grows up...an audio engineer."