

# WE PERFORM

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Crickets come together in harmony to perform a symphony throughout the entirety of every night. A sound so profound that it's heard over cars driving in the distance and trees that sway in the wind. They produce their unique sound through the friction of their little bitty legs, which rub together as if they were a bow, ever so slightly striking the chords of a violin. The crickets are perfectly in sync and perform as one. When something comes within a foot of the band, they fall silent as if that something was a director who has gracefully raised both hands to the sky, only to come back down midway, with the index finger pressed against the thumb, drawn outward in a horizontal motion. The crickets are a massive band with one type of instrument. Their director is the sun and anything that puts them in fear.

We started young—in the third grade. We were given plastic, off-white recorders with six holes. We placed both hands on the instrument and covered one hole with our left index finger. We then placed our mouths to the mouthpiece and blew. Some of us fell silent. Some of us squeaked. Some of us cried. After a few weeks, all of us were able to play the recorder. We held a concert for our parents at the end of the school year, and the sounds from our recorders radiated off the gym walls with a violent scream. Parents and teachers clapped and cheered. We thought we performed well, and we were satisfied.

In the fifth grade we graduated from playing the recorder to playing an instrument of our choice. Our options were plentiful: trumpet, trombone, tuba, clarinet, flute, alto or tenor saxophone, or percussion. The catch was that our parents were responsible for providing the instrument. I was originally forced to choose the clarinet only because my grandfather had an old one he figured I could use to save my mom money. My grandfather's clarinet looked like an artifact from the 1800s. The case smelled like dust and mothballs, and it didn't even have all of its components. The old clarinet was lifeless; I ended up choosing a gold, rent-to-own alto saxophone with marble keys. The horn was engraved with a flower, my name, and a message that read, "love daddy." I fell in love with my saxophone, and I played it to the best of my ability. We had many band recitals throughout the school year for our family to attend. We thought we performed well, and we were satisfied.

Once we reached high school, we wanted to be in the marching band. We were freshman and we went to band camp for initiation. We stayed in cabins for a week, and were harassed by the upper-class kids for the first three days of camp. They woke us up by marching past the cabins beating drums at 5 a.m. They tied our luggage to the trees, put plastic over the toilet seats, and slam-dunked us in a kiddie pool next to the picnic tables. They tied two of us together at the ankles at midnight and made us run down a hill to the field. They made us run laps on the field while they sprayed us with water guns. After initiation, we got down to business and learned how to be in the marching band. We learned to read and play unfamiliar songs as well as to move to match our sounds. When we returned from band camp, we performed at our high school football games and the Christmas parade downtown. We, the marching band, were in sync and played as one unit. We knew we performed well, and we were satisfied.

I played my saxophone for a total of seven years. After my sophomore year, I decided that I didn't want to play anymore. I started smoking weed, and I went to band class high. My band director, who witnessed me transform from a child to a teenager, knew when I was high. He noticed a change in my behavior, and notified the principal of my intoxication. I was suspended multiple times and thought it was in my best interest to attend a new school. That was the end of my relationship with my saxophone. I never opened up the saxophone case again, unless it was to retrieve the weed and bullets I had hid inside.

Two years after I graduated high school, I was incarcerated. I attended church services at the prison and I enjoyed hearing the choir. I wanted to join but I didn't want to sing. I wanted to play an instrument. They didn't have a saxophone, so I had to learn how to play something new. My options were limited: keyboard, guitar, or drums. My dad bought me a drum set as a kid, and I had taught myself how to play a simple beat. The drums were the only instrument I was somewhat familiar with, so that's what I decided to play. I signed up to attend a class to learn the drums and join the choir.

We learned how to hit the snare drum in ways to make different sounds. We learned to use the snare drum, high hat, and bass drum all at once. We learned to fill beats with cymbals and tom drums. We enjoyed our class, but we didn't last long. The grim reaper showed up and showed out: COVID-19. The world went under lockdown and the prison went with it, shutting our class and the choir down for good.

Years later, the prison began operating almost normally, and the choir reassembled. I joined as a drummer, regardless of the fact that I hadn't held a pair of sticks in three years. I had confidence that I was capable of learning the church songs quickly and hold the beat to match—I was right.

We practiced three times a week and performed for the congregation every Sunday. Our director kept us on point and ensured that we were prepared for every service. The crowd hollered. They clapped. They cheered. They cried. They screamed, "Hallelujah!" and stomped their feet to the beat I produced. We were exhilarated every Sunday and took pride in our performances. We knew we performed to perfection, and we were satisfied.