

Still crazy about rock 'n' roll, after all these years

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If you attended Dexter High School 22 years ago, you may remember Mike Gentry as a nerd who got beat up regularly by the wrestlers, wore his mother's hand-me-downs and took his guitar with him everywhere.

He was the kid who got sent to the office for refusing to put down his guitar in the classroom and then kept on playing it once he got there.

"They'd threaten to send me home if I didn't stop," Gentry recalled as he sat outside a cafe on a rainy afternoon last week. "I was like, 'Rock out! I'll bring an amp tomorrow. Will I get home quicker that way?'"

At 40, Gentry is still a guitar-toting music freak who still does things his way and manages to get away with it. He has tackled a number of life's challenges, including recent surgery for a brain tumor, with his characteristic devil-may-care attitude.

"I think my life is a series of real dramatic setbacks and then profound miracles," said Gentry, dressed in blue jeans, a black leather jacket and black Doc Martens. "It's like, 'Wow! That happened to you?' and 'Wow! That happened?' The worst thing, and then the best thing. And I'm just a cork bobbing through the stream of life."

Every summer, Gentry directs the Ann Arbor Dayjams music camps for children 9 to 15 years old who are interested in singing or playing guitar, bass, keyboards or drums. In 2002, one of the campers was Joey Gaydos of Belleville, the 12-year-old guitar player in the hit movie "School of Rock."

And Gentry will soon earn his degree in music education from Eastern Michigan University.

"He's the most interesting student I've ever had, for sure," said Willard Zirk, a professor of music at EMU since 1980. "You can't put him in a box."

Asked about Gentry's musical talent, Zirk replied: "He IS music. There are a few musicians in my life who really become music, but he's one. It's all expression. And that's what he's all about."

Friends describe Gentry as an in-the-moment person with an incredible memory, someone with a quick wit, infectious enthusiasm for life and something to say about everything.

Amy Willacker is a member of Gentry's band, Shining Farmer, which will perform Saturday night in Ypsilanti. In the five years she's known him, Willacker said she's been amazed at how Gentry can charm his way out of any sticky situation just by being himself.

"It's been interesting to watch him go through the university process," she said. "He can go into a meeting where he's getting in trouble for something and come out of it with the teacher thanking him."

She said the same thing happened in the hospital last year around the time he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Doctors would come into the room to tell him something serious, and they would leave laughing.

Surgeons removed the tumor last summer, and Gentry has made a full recovery.

Gentry, who lives with his wife and two sons in the Webster Township house he grew up in, has known many dark days. When he first learned of the tumor, his thoughts were of his two boys, who are 11 and 8, and how he didn't want them to grow up without a father like he did.

When he was 13, Gentry and his 37-year-old father were driving home after visiting relatives when a drunken driver traveling about 100 miles an hour slammed into them. Gentry was not seriously hurt, but his father died at the scene.

His mother, Mary Gentry, an Ypsilanti quilter who is well respected for her talents as a fabric artist, recalls the day she knew her son was a musician. He was in the fifth grade, excited about playing the French horn, and came home from school talking about the moment the entire band played the entire scale.

"He said, 'It was like the sun went down and just exploded in my stomach,'" she recalled. "And that was it. We knew he was a musician from then on."

He picked up a guitar when he was 14 and couldn't put it down. He said he found solace in his music at a difficult time following his

father's death, and songwriting became a way to express those feelings.

When he was 23, Gentry decided he should move to California to play his music. A week later, he was in Hollywood with \$33, his truck, his guitar, one suitcase, and one question: 'What am I doing here?'

He lived there for eight years, working at A & M Records, "gloriously misspending" his 20s and ended up back in Michigan, "without any diseases, drug addictions or tattoos."

It's a good time in Gentry's life. Not only is he happily married with two "super amazing wild-men children," but he's now in a band, Shining Farmer, with his best friends, which gives him an outlet for some of the 2,000 or so songs he's written over the years.

Gentry's not sure where he'll go after he graduates.

He says he wants to teach music like others teach art, so students see their instruments as a painter sees his brush and a dancer sees the open stage.

"The instruments are a place to take you where words fall short," he said. "They aren't just things you sit in a chair and play so people can dress up and come and feel cultured."

Gentry says he is frustrated to see "too little emphasis placed on ownership of music" in schools. Music is not always seen as an outlet for creative energy and self-expression. He thinks that's why so many people stop playing their instruments when they graduate from high school.

"They never played again because they never learned how to make it part of their own life," he said. "It isn't for other people. Music is for you."

When he went back to college in his late 30s, he wondered how he'd feel going back to school. Gentry, who looks younger than his years, said he feels comfortable studying beside people half his age because he has always felt good around people who have hopes and dreams and aspirations.

He is just as enthusiastic about Dayjams as he was when he first helped bring the national program to Ann Arbor five years ago. Kids come to summer camp even if they have no experience with an instrument, and in the course of a week, they form a band, have individual instruction on an instrument, write their own music and play a concert in front of 300 people.

Brian Delaney, who was in a band with Gentry when they were at Dexter High, admires Gentry's work with Dayjams and says it's typical of him to try to get the best out of each musician, no matter his or her level of expertise.

"He can get kids excited about being creative and be supportive of what they're doing," he said. "It's a very cool thing he's doing."

Gentry says singing is his true calling.

"But really I just want to be a singer in a rock 'n' roll band," he said. "I don't want to work! That's what it boils down to. That's what I'm the best at. That's what I was born to do. That's what I love to do. There's nothing in the world I do better than that."

Gentry has his own twist on the saying, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans."

"To me, life is what happens when I'm making NO plans," he said. "I mean none at all. But it's just like: 'Wow, this is great.'"

Gentry and his band, Shining Farmer, will perform at 8 p.m. Friday at Rubber Soul, 115 W. Michigan Avenue in downtown Ypsilanti. There is no cover charge.

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