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By David Rocks

Guitar Dreams Never Die

At Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp, frustrated musicians leave their day jobs behind

Perhaps it's my name. Ever since I was a skinny high school kid, I felt certain I was destined to be a guitar legend. Sure, I know that was a long time ago, and these days, I look a lot more like the lawn-mowing, mortgage-paying father of two from the suburbs I am than Eric Clapton or Keith Richards. But somewhere deep inside, there's a star musician just itching to get out.

So when one of my fellow editors asked for a volunteer to attend Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp, I jumped right up. Here was my big chance to cast off the dowdy, middle-aged life I'd been living and rub elbows with the likes of Roger Daltrey, the lead singer of The Who. This five-day blast of New York rock life was going to get me off the straight and narrow and into the deranged, debauched world of stardom that ought to be the birthright of any kid born with the last name of Rocks.

Think of it as a high-decibel version of sports fantasy camp. Taking a page from such camps, promoter David Fishof came up with the idea of giving forty- and fiftysomething lawyers, brokers, and dentists a chance to crank it up with legends (O.K., mostly minor legends) of their garage-band fantasies. The \$5,950 program (rocknrollfantasycamp.com) consists of five days in New York City, jamming, rehearsing, and listening to rockers and promoters opine on everything from heroin to hair dye. The week culminates in a Battle of the Bands on Sunday night. "Everybody always asked me what it's like to hang out with rock stars," says Fishof, who also manages Ringo Starr's band. "I thought I could give them the experience in this camp."

So it was that I found myself on a drizzly Wednesday afternoon in New York's ultra-hip Hudson Hotel, guitar in hand, staring out at a room of what seemed like 100 people in black t-shirts, black jeans, and black sunglasses. Just like in real rock 'n roll life, if you want to be in a band, you have to audition. "A great player who comes here and pays \$6,000 doesn't deserve to be put together with someone who can't play," says Mark Rivera, the camp's music director, whose day job is playing saxophone in Billy Joel's band.

Looking out at the crowd, I was terrified. But with "camp counselors" Liberty DeVitto -- Billy Joel's drummer -- and bassist Jack Blades from the '80s band Night Ranger backing me up, I figured I couldn't go wrong. I belted out the Talking Heads classic *Psycho Killer*, hit most of the notes I needed to, and finished to cheers and applause. A half-dozen camp staffers slapped me on the back, saying things like, "You sounded great." I know they're paid to say those things, but it felt good. After all, it's a fantasy. I was pumped.

Then Rivera sorted the 80 campers into nine bands, and it was off to a rehearsal studio, one of many scattered around New York's Chelsea neighborhood. My bandmates included guitarists Dan Lemaitre (a Merrill Lynch ([MER](#)) analyst from Boston) and Maria Adubato, a homemaker from New Jersey whose husband had given her a trip to camp as a gift. Our lead singer, Gary Zoldos, is vice-president of a \$9.4 million trucking and transportation company in Buffalo.

An hour into rehearsal, we were creating a horrific cacophony. Then in walked the Bad Boy Brass, also known as the horn section for The Monkees. The trio's diminutive trumpet player, Eric Biondo, heard our noise and shuddered. "You guys sound great," he said charitably. "But maybe if you turned down the volume, you'd sound even better." We turned down our amps. Then we turned them down again. And again. "Now, start listening to each other," he said. "That's what music is all about." We started listening -- and we began to sound better.

Over the next four days, other pros stopped by to help us work up our repertoire. On one occasion, Daltrey visited our rehearsal room and listened in on what we were doing, never once wincing at the bad notes I managed to inject into the mix. Lunches featured chats with and short concerts by the likes of Mountain frontman Leslie West. In the evenings, pros and campers came together for onstage jam sessions.

On Sunday night, it was time for the big show. We all met at The Bottom Line, a Greenwich Village club, where each band played three songs. Many had chosen Who covers, and Daltrey gamely sang lead vocal on every one of them. "Roger, you make me nervous," Craig Langweiler, a stock broker from Philadelphia, said to Daltrey as they prepared to start playing the 1975 Who hit *Squeeze Box*. "Not as nervous as you make me," Daltrey joked back. Believe it or not, they both sounded great -- as any camp counselor would be sure to tell you. In fact, despite being dubbed a battle, Sunday night ended with every group getting an award for anything from Best Vocals to Coolest Band. Unlike in real life, at Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp, there are no bad reviews.