

A Letter From Little Steven

Something remarkable happened to me. That something was rock and roll. When it came into my life, everything changed. I woke up, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. There was a distinct before and after. Suddenly the world wasn't just something I watched through the window of the family car. The world was a place to enter, a place in which to do something, to make changes, and to belong to a diverse community that believed in change.

This project, Little Steven's Rock and Roll High School, is my effort to share rock and roll's history with middle school and high school students across the country, to give something back for all I've been given. I hope—and really believe—that students will recognize, in the music and in the communities that grew up around the music, the possibility that there's something in it for them, right now. I want to share the history of rock and roll and make that history a part of the classroom dialogue; but of equal importance is my interest in conveying a sense that the history of rock and roll is something ongoing, a movement to build upon. The more students of today know about where this music came from and how it changed the world, the more certainly we'll be able to say, "Music still has that power—and the best is yet to come."

In the United States today arts funding is being cut on a regular basis. The situation is dramatic, the decline sharp. The unacceptable pittance we now give to the arts suggests that we have forgotten what we get from the arts. A recent Harris Poll makes very clear what many of us have known for a long time: music education encourages and motivates students to stay in school longer.¹ Music opens doors, feeds the mind and the soul. Yet with every passing year we see music programs being the first to go when budgets are created. According to the National Association for Music Education, only 50% of public high schools include music as a core academic subject, and only two thirds of those with music classes require participation in the arts to graduate. The arts, it seems, have become a luxury, not a necessity. How did we get so far off track? Why are we failing to nourish the student mind in the ways that have proven successful for centuries? Given what we are offering students, it seems that we are asking too much in return.

What Little Steven's Rock and Roll High School offers is a way into the arts. By sharing with students the history of music, this project aims to unlock a world of possibility. In the rock and roll story we see young people empowered and discovering their own voices, we see organic communities built up around the music, we see people looking past their racial and cultural differences to create an art that builds its unique energy by bringing together disparate traditions. I recently read a report done for the Institute for the Study of the Americas, which showed that teenagers today are as racially segregated as they were in the 1950's. Shouldn't we be investigating in detail the historical moments and the cultural arenas in which racial mixing has happened organically, without resistance, without pressure, and with deep respect? Shouldn't it be imperative that we learn from such history? Rock and roll played an essential part in breaking down the emotional barriers that might have prevented the relatively smooth transition to civil rights in our society. Too few young people know this story. And it's not just a history, not just the "good old days"—it's a model for what can happen, right now, in their world. Music engages the mind and unlocks the emotions, but music culture also reveals social alternatives.

1 For more data relating to the connection between the study of music and student performance, see appendix one.

I was another teenager in New Jersey, uninspired, a little isolated, and not at all sure what I wanted to do with myself . . . if anything. At first, rock and roll seemed like something really good that lived on 45rpm records. But then it kept getting better. The landscape around me changed. The people I found myself among knew things I didn't know and taught me plenty. The mind with which I was thinking was brand new to me. The arts, and music in particular, jump-started my life. It was the best deal I've ever been offered. And I'm only one of many who took that deal. Students today deserve the same chance. But this won't happen unless they are first introduced to the arts. Little Steven's Rock and Roll High School is one such introduction. Bring everyone you can.

Little Steven