

# Standing Ovation

by Michael Barela

*All of the reviews are the same, one star reviews with five star ravings. What the fuck do these pigs want from me, if not my art? Pearls before swine would be an understatement! I work so hard on my music, and they always pack the seats, but no one says one damn good thing about it. Why do I even try to give them a good show?*

Charlie's thoughts seethed in his mind like a feedback loop, much like the amplifier feedback he planned to start screeching out at two minutes and thirty-eight seconds into his set, let it loop over itself and grow in intensity for nine seconds, and then cut it off abruptly with the sound of a ball-peen hammer breaking a vase and him stomping back to his piano. It was a piece titled "For the Wait" that he had recorded for his professionally produced album, *Dream Eater*. It was the first and only single that the record company decided to invest in, it was also the only album that he had been paid to make. Charlie thought *Dream Eater* had some of his best work yet, but he knew that tonight's performance would be *the one*.

*Dream Eater* sold well enough for the record company to get their investment back and had kept Charlie well fed for a few months. It sold well enough for him to tour in support of the album. It also was the big break he wanted since he was a kid; it was his opportunity to have his name known. He marveled at the difference between seeing his name on the local bar marquee for a show that same night and seeing his name on posters promoting shows that wouldn't happen for months to come. These posters would often be designed conservatively, using a collage of his choice of photographs (none of which containing any trace of his image) and photocopied pieces of paper with his handwriting giving the details. The record company sent him many posters that they had made as well; those were glossy, but gaudy. They featured a picture of Charlie alone, a picture from the photo-shoot the record company had paid for. The picture was bad enough; it was just him staring at the camera, the

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photographer was terrible at giving direction. As if to add insult to injury, the information was pasted onto his photo in a stock font. Those posters had no personality and no voice, Charlie hated those posters.

But to Charlie White, those few months when his record company was floating him by felt like a lifetime ago. Not even a full year had passed since they have dropped him from payroll, and Charlie was already nostalgically reflecting on how different everything felt. It felt like an insult to him to still play in packed auditoriums for people that acted like they loved his performance; he could never tell if they were laughing *with* him or *at* him.

*That's enough thinking, the crowd should be sufficiently uncomfortable from the extended silence,* Charlie thought to himself, *I know the house is packed, I know they're all expecting a musical freak-show, I know they're all going to be silently writing their own scathing reviews in their minds. I'll try to make sure they don't.* And Charlie did genuinely hope that those who would write a review of his performance the next day would write good reviews and understand its meaning. He would stand up from his recliner in the dressing room and would make his way down the hall that would take him to the stage; the stage that his father's concert piano waited for him to strike just the right keys at just the right time.

He stopped twiddling with his stopwatch and started his way down the hall when the stopwatch read eighteen seconds.

While he walked down the fluorescent lit hallway he thought about his dad. He always did before a performance; it wasn't quite a ritual, but it was always during his walk to the stage that he would feel like his father's spirit would be there waiting for him when he sat at the piano bench. He didn't feel his father's spirit with him when he stepped away from the piano bench, however. All those violent and jarring noises that Charlie used would have offended his father in life *and* in death would cease and he would be all alone again.

In an interview, Charlie was asked why he does what he does. Even though he responded to the question with a quick, "I

want to change how people perceive music, how it's defined," Charlie had never really thought of this. Tonight, walking down this dreadfully lit hallway, with the air that tasted faintly of metal and sweat, Charlie would seriously ponder the question; not for the sake of musicologists, any fans,

*Critics, more likely*

or any curious readers; he thought about his fascination with noise and its origins for *himself*.

*Now is as good a time as any.*

Charlie had only written three songs that relied solely on conventional instruments, and those songs were the first three he had written, ever. His first song was a short piano tune, he would whistle and sometimes try free-flow poetry when he played it at parties, but it was written only for the piano. The second song he had written with a friend; it featured his piano, an acoustic twelve-string guitar, and his friend singing. Like all of his songs, the third piece was centered around his piano work, but it was the first of which where the idea of redefining music began to arise. The other instruments used in the song were still conventional; a guitar, a trap drum set, a bass guitar, and cello, but the song used multiple time-signature changes, key changes, long silences, and an ending where the toppling of the drum set was intentional and key to the essence of the song.

After Charlie wrote this piece, he began to use his stopwatch to time various ordinary sounds and noises precisely to his music. He started small such as pouring water into an empty vase, fifty-four seconds into the song, then tapping lightly on a service-desk bell three times, one minute and forty-five seconds in, tapping two pieces of six feet PVC pipe together to make a rippling hollow sound, two minutes and one second in. To juxtapose his classical piano playing, he would often begin to "decompose" (in his own words) the melody, making it sound less like a concerto and more like a nightmare. His hands would flourish up and down the keyboard madly, he would toggle the sustain switch set to maximum hold, letting all the notes ring with ever rising intensity. While the notes rang out loudly, he

would push himself away from his bench and reach the unconventional instruments to use them and return in time to pick up the piano melody where he left off. On a few occasions, when he was on the record-label-sponsored tour, he had extra people on the stage to help him with those parts. It really helped for the piece wherein a sledgehammer was slammed against a sheet of metal, three minutes into the piece, since Charlie never fancied himself a strong man.

*But why do these weird sounds intrigue me? Why do I feel the need to force this onto the listener? Even I feel uncomfortable when these sounds ring out, but there's something poetically beautiful about it. Something like...*

Charlie couldn't put a name to this poetically beautiful quality that gave his music the distinct sound of his voice. His music was chaotic in its confusion and violent in its temperament, just like the man who wrote it.

As he took in a few deep breaths before daring the stage for yet another performance, he had a sudden and jarring memory recollection. It was the answer he was looking for.

Charlie knew his father not so much from firsthand experience, but rather mostly from the stories he was told about him and when he reminded someone of his father. When Charlie was a young child, too young to understand what was happening, he witnessed his father's passing; it all happened so quickly. Charlie was idly playing with his toys in the living room when his father came home late from his work; his father called out for his wife to join him in a song around the family piano, a sort of ritual he had when he got back from work. But as Charlie's father made his way across the living room to the piano, he suffered a sudden heart attack. Charlie didn't understand what his dad's flailing and grasping meant, but Charlie automatically assumed it was part of his song.

*Daddy just added a dance.*

Charlie's dad was not dying peacefully. He swung his body wildly, as if in protest of his clogged arteries, and caused quite a stir

before finally letting go of his mortal coil. Charlie remembered the sound of ceramic vases being swept off their pedestals, glass being shattered, the thump of flesh against drywall, and the crash of piano keys being slammed and the corresponding strings being held with maximum force when his father finally collapsed upon the piano. He remembered those sounds. He remembered that those sounds seemed so perfectly timed and in sync with what Charlie had expected. The startling cacophony of piano notes was like a punctuation mark to all the beautiful music his dad used to play. In one brilliant mess of noise, Charlie was without a father. But out of the mess, there was one sound that Charlie could never recall until recently, and felt it very important. There was something he was missing when he was trying to recreate the magic of that moment for the masses.

His performances were missing the sound of his mother crying.

Tonight, however, there would be plenty of crying. Crying of all flavors; hysterical crying, cries of joy, cries of surprise, cries of agony, and cries of sadness Charlie hoped would drown out the sound of his mother crying now repeating in his mind. Twenty-one minutes and thirty-seven seconds into his set, the first C-4 charge would go off; the one he planted under the eastern most seats by the street entrance. The explosions would give a beautiful flourish to the crashing crescendo of his fingers dancing frantically on the keyboard. The people in the seats far from the blast radius would be frantically running for the emergency exit, no doubt, at twenty-one minutes and forty-nine seconds. That is when he planned for the gunpowder pipe-bombs with masonry nail shrapnel, which was conveniently placed by the emergency exit and near his piano, to be triggered to explode. The shrapnel didn't appeal to Charlie, but it was necessary for the punctuating sounds of the nails driven through the wood of the building and would hopefully smash through the piano and rattle its strings with gorgeously random discord.

There would be more screams and more crying at this point, and maybe things would stay on plan, or maybe they would get lost in the mess of chaos, as all good art does. Charlie had decided that his performance would end in chaos, his plan ended there; let fate take the reins and be the conductor to this opera of confusion. He would let the bootleggers record the beautiful catastrophe on their cell phones; let them have that, he had a recording device stowed safely away to record the audio. All of the plans he had laid out for his art had been accomplished, and he could finally rest. His artistic pursuit would be complete, he had laid out the best set he could and would do his best to pull it off with as much bravado as possible.

He knew that the audience and critics wouldn't understand it immediately, or maybe not for days or weeks, but his final show would be his best ever; *no one* could top this performance.

