



STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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# encore!

## Nurturing young musicians in the woods of western Maine

Two boys walk down a quiet dirt road in rural Maine. It's high summer, dry and hot, and a lake winks in blue flashes through the pines. The boys, fifth graders perhaps, are having an intense debate. Their hands flail, darting wildly up and down, back and forth. Their cheeks bulge, their lips purse, and they fill the air with explosions, hisses, and rhythmic, percussive rumbles. They take turns pounding the air and banter back and forth in a kind of duel.

Typical boys, their minds chock full of rivalry and dreams of battle, right? No. They're two young drummers debating the proper way to accompany a Beatles tune, and they're on their way to lunch at Camp Encore/Coda, a retreat for young musicians in Sweden, Maine.

Visiting Encore/Coda for the first time can be perplexing. The place is the warren of buildings and hive of activity typical of most summer camps, but during afternoon practice sessions, this one sounds as if a symphony/jazz/chamber/string/baroque orchestra is tumbling down a steep hill in mid-movement. But stick around for a while, and the place begins to make sense.

Encore/Coda began in 1950 as the dream of Phil Saltman, a jazz pianist from Revere, Mas-

sachusetts, and his wife Ruth, an opera singer from the neighboring town of Winthrop. Nearly 60 years later, the camp is run by their son, Jamie, and his wife, Ellen. Jamie has spent every summer of his life here, and his constant smile suggests that he's loved every minute.

While Encore/Coda is a place where young people ages eight to 17 sing songs around campfires, splash in a cool lake, and smash molten marshmallows between graham crackers, it's also a place for serious musical study. Individually, in small ensembles, and occasionally as an entire orchestra, the campers cultivate their craft under the demanding eyes of professionals. The summer season, late June through mid-August, is split into two three-week sessions, but campers can stay for the entire season (six and a half weeks for \$6,900). A scholarship program is available.

Scattered throughout the 80-acre campus on the shores of Stearns Pond are dozens of outbuilding with names like Brahms, Pagannini, Bach, and Zappa. Each is a tiny, austere studio, adorned with little more than a chair, piano, music stand, and light bulb. Every day campers steal away to these tiny mews, pick up their instruments, and strive to improve. And as they do, they fill the forest with a stew of notes, melodies, rhythms, and songs.

“It doesn’t matter how old you are  
or where you come from.  
Music is the great adhesive.”

– Jamie Saltman

Walk down any wooded path, and you’ll see joyful youngsters trotting along with big leather cases. If you stop them to ask about camp, you’ll hear a common chord. “I can’t imagine a summer without it,” proclaims Jeffrey (everyone calls him “Fej”—yes, that’s Jeff backwards) Caplan, a longtime camper with a huge mop of bushy hair and a perpetual grin.

A child who arrives as a bright-eyed, slightly terrified third grader, one hand clutching a parent’s arm and the other latched onto a violin case, may never want to leave.

Audrey Finkelstein first came in 1989 without enthusiasm, but she soon changed her mind. “My entire childhood was formed here,” she says. After 11 years, she joined the staff.

Lisa Phillips, a camper from Toronto who spent summers from 1995 to 2000 studying musical drama, sounds a similar theme. “My future was born here,” she says.

The Saltmans run the camp with a combination of discipline and whimsy that keeps everyone on their toes and excited. Kids smile, laugh, run, practice hard, relax, sneak around, occasionally get in trouble, eat, sleep, swim, play soccer, toss Frisbees, goof off, have impromptu jam sessions, give concerts, and applaud each other in wild displays of respectful and ordered musical chaos.

Although fun is vital, “camp is not a cruise, not entertainment,” Jamie Saltman says. “Kids take individual responsibility. It’s about character development as much as it’s about music.”

He points both index fingers at his chest. “Instead of thinking it’s about me, the kids learn to turn their arrows outward.” He points his fingers outward. “The cool thing about music is that all the arrows point to everyone. It’s about teamwork. It doesn’t matter how old you are or where you come from. Music is the great adhesive.”

A gaggle of junior high girls sit around a lunch table, debating what makes Encore/Coda so special. They all talk at once, poking each other, clapping,

smiling: “What about, oh my gosh, isn’t that the best, and then there’s, yes, but it’s not all hard work, oh, I love that studio, she’s improved so much, I told him his playing was fabulous, and I never say fabulous, and the concert’s this weekend, and my parents are coming, and the little kids always get standing ovations—yes, yes, it’s mandatory” (they all nod), “and what’s Ellen Saltman like? Yikes, watch out, she has radar” (giggles).

And so it goes, until they stop to breathe, and a dark-haired girl rests her head on the shoulder of her neighbor. “And the flood of music we hear when we walk down the road,” she says. They all sigh, and their eyes sparkle.

Later, the sparring strains of practice glide through the pines in a welter of discordant sounds: drum sticks striking stretched hide, breath blowing through intestines of brass, bows vibrating across taut strings, a cacophony of pounding, plucking, pulling, and page-turning. And then, down near the lake, a cappella voices rising. It’s unorchestrated, unchoreographed, yet still somehow harmonious. These are the sounds of young lives growing. And each week the youngsters band together and put on a concert.

The paradox of Camp Encore/Coda lies in its name. “Encore” and “coda” are terms that describe finales, not beginnings. They come as the musicians prepare to lay down their instruments and relax in their chairs. And yet, deep in the woods of Maine, young people from far and wide come here to set their musical lives in motion. They pick up their instruments, sit up straight, and begin. A few will go on to music careers, most will not. Yet the training they receive, and the relationships they build, will be invaluable.

Whatever their chosen vocations, they leave this camp knowing the keys to success: passion, teamwork, friendship, determination, precision, punctuality, and, of course, practice.

The real encore will be the rest of their lives. ✦

Page 60: Maria Baeza (from Madrid, Spain, on the right), and Harper Mills (Boston), practice on the shore of Stearns Pond in 2007. The Mozart studio is perhaps the most Lilliputian on the campus. Page 63: Bryan Louie (near) and Ryan Spatz in the Chopin studio play an impromptu piano duet. Matt (Mick) McGowen, a 5th year camper from Falmouth, MA, plays his trombone on the treehouse steps. Bottom: Performance in Saltman Hall during Parents Day, July 2007.

