

James Lyng High: School of rock, rap and urban arts

For the third straight year, the St-Henri high school is releasing a “mixtape” of songs recorded by students in its music program.

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It's not often you'll hear a teen saying, “High school rocks!” But it's hard to think of a better way to describe what's going on at James Lyng.

For the third straight year, the St-Henri borough educational institution is releasing an online “mixtape” of rap and rock songs recorded by students in its music program.

“During the year, I have the students working on all these projects,” said teacher Nathan Gage. “At the end of the year, we create a compilation album of the students’ work when it’s done, curated by our 15 Plus, or entrepreneurship class — which also does all the promotion.”

A former touring musician (in indie bands Elfin Saddle and Shapes and Sizes) and record store owner (Phonopolis, on Bernard St., which he no longer owns), Gage was hired three years ago as part of James Lyng’s push to rebrand itself as an urban arts high school.

“I came in with the mandate to create a popular music program,” he said.

A studio has since been set up in the school basement, where students can rehearse and record their songs.

“Most of the recording that has gone on in the past has been hip hop,” Gage said. “This year we’ve incorporated bands. We’ve always had rock bands here, but this year, we’ve actually managed to write some songs with the bands, record them with an engineer and put them out on the mixtape as well. It’s great for the bands — they get excited about it — and it’s great to fully represent what we do here at the school.”

In partnership with McGill University’s Department of Integrated Studies in Education, as well as an array of local hip hop artists and a three-year, \$200,000 grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, James Lyng’s trailblazing initiative has brought hope, inspiration and a different way of looking at education to a student body facing more than its

share of challenges (the school is referred many students at risk of dropping out, and has been successful at retaining a high percentage of them).

“It’s a student-centred program,” Gage said. “We start from where the kids are at, musically, and we take it from there. We’re lucky to have a lot of support. We get in beat-making tutors and rapping tutors and we are able to split up and meet the kids’ interests that way.”

Cedric Forbes, 16, had never tried rapping before taking Gage’s music classes. He has appeared on all three mixtapes released by the program.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “It’s a good opportunity and I’m grateful for having it. This program allows chance-taking. Everyone that’s in it helps you and teaches you.”

Forbes is one half of the duo Huncho Party, alongside his friend Camden Kelly. The pair can be heard on the mixtape’s opening track, 1000, and the song Warm Up.

They came up with many of their lines by freestyling in the studio, Forbes explained. To have the resulting songs mixed and mastered and available for all to hear is a thrill he’s still wrapping his head around.

“It’s crazy. I never thought people would listen to my music, and they’re enjoying it. I’m happy about that.”



A studio has been set up in the school basement, where students can rehearse and record their songs, but sometimes you just need to get outside. James Lyng music teacher Nathan Gage is on guitar; Ashley Prud'homme sings. PETER MCCABE / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Gage handles the School of Rock component of the program, playing in groups with his students and mentoring them in the writing process.

“Often we’ll learn a song (by a famous band) and then I’ll say, ‘Hey, what if we take the chords we learned from that song and put them in a different order,’ and we’ll see if something comes out of that.”

Gage and his students celebrated the release of *The Pride: A James Lyng High School Mixtape* at lunchtime on Tuesday with a barbecue featuring performances by some of the bands.

Grade 8 students Ashley Prud'homme and Nora Jolicoeur both came to James Lyng this year from FACE School, drawn by their new school’s spirit of creative freedom.

“I think the best thing about the program they offer here is that we get to make our own music,” said bassist Jolicoeur. “That’s really awesome.”

Listening to the finished product is “kind of almost shocking,” she added. “I’m so hyped about it.”

Jolicoeur and lead vocalist Prud'homme appear on the alternative rock tracks What the Light Has Shown and Hapless Blues, along with the rest of the James Lyng Honour Band.

"I was actually really excited," Prud'homme said of the experience. "Having other people be able to listen to music that me and my friends wrote, it really shows that no matter how young you are or where you come from, when you're passionate about something, nothing can take away from that. You can always achieve what you want in life."



James Lyng Sec. 5 students perform a song that will be included on a mixtape featuring hip-hop and rock songs created during the past year as part of the school's music program.
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AT A GLANCE

Listen to The Pride: James Lyng High School Mixtape 2017-18 at [upnextrecordings.com](https://www.upnextrecordings.com/) (<https://www.upnextrecordings.com/>).

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