



THE SUBLIME YEARS

BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON ILLUSTRATION BY DONGYUN LEE

Julia left last week—got in her little Honda, backed out and drove away. West to California. With her long brown hair streaming and her boyfriend riding shotgun. My oldest daughter, gone.

Afterward, I went into her room. It felt empty at first and then I realized it was actually full to the brim with her absence. She'd painted this ochre wash on the walls and pinned those Indian bedspreads to the ceiling, picked out these red-velvet curtains and glued the Jimi Hendrix postage stamps above the closet and put the "radioactive" sign on the door. Then she used a magic marker to write lyrics on the walls:

*Laughter, it's free. Anytime,
just call me.
439 0116, when you're down
with Sublime you get
funky fresh lyrics ...*

She got that first Sublime CD for her ninth birthday. It was a gift from her uncle Steve, a tattooed downtown punk. She unwrapped it and passed it around, and I remember looking at the drunk naked clown on the inside cover and thinking, great Steve, totally appropriate choice for a nine-year-old. Even better than the Minutemen CD you bought for her last birthday.

But that was the year Alanis Morissette broke through with *Jagged Little Pill*, so Julia put Sublime on hold. She listened to Morissette nonstop. And one day I realized she was singing the songs *exactly*, not just when she was singing along, but also with the stereo off. The exact pitch, the exact rhythm. So I told her she might want to try playing along on the guitar and showed her the chords to "Hand In My Pocket."

An hour later, I came back into the room and she was playing the song—not stumbling through it, *playing* it.

Soon she was performing at all the family parties. It was a little freaky, this 10-year-old with a smoky voice and perfect rhythm, churning away with such adult focus. Then I took her to an open-mic night and she got a standing ovation. After that, she recorded eight songs by Lucinda Williams on her uncle's eight-track and we sent them to Lucinda through a friend. The next time Lucinda performed in our area, she invited us



backstage and called everyone over. "This is the little girl who sang my songs!"

Then Julia discovered that old Sublime CD and painted her room and pinned up those bedspreads. Every hour of the day and night, you could stand outside the door and hear those punky ska rhythms and Brad Nowell's supple voice. Sublime became the soundtrack to our lives. I bought her *400z. to Freedom* and all the bootlegs, trying not to worry too much about the message she was getting from songs like "Smoke Two Joints" or "Caress Me Down." She even sang with her daddy's band a few times, usually "Santeria" or "Doin' Time." And one night she sat at the foot of my bed and played me a private Sublime concert, one of the happiest moments of my life.

Eventually, she moved on to Jeff Buckley and Fiona Apple and all the other music in the world. There was only a touch of reggae in the CD she recorded at 16, *Melt The Blue*. But Sublime had marked her forever. I asked her why when

she called from the road, somewhere in Oklahoma. (After three years of straight As in the science department of a major university, Julia dropped out to see if she could make it as a musician, playing with her band The Big Bang.) She talked about Sublime's carefree party vibe and Brad's sexy voice and especially the way they mixed everything together—punk and rock and reggae and ska and even the Grateful Dead. "I loved the music you and Mom played," she said. "But Sublime was the first thing I heard by kids who were closer to my age, who were living in my world and not just yours."

Sublime gave her the news she needed to hear: that you could mix up all your influences and come out with yourself. "It allowed me to be free," she said.

And now she is.

→ JOHN H. RICHARDSON IS A WRITER-AT-LARGE FOR *ESQUIRE*. LISTEN TO CLIPS FROM HIS DAUGHTER JULIA'S MUSIC AT PASTEMAGAZINE.COM/NOVEMBER08

