

The Record - Music News From NPR

Ridgewood, N.J.: Why Here? Why Now?

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Ridgewood High School, where bands like Rel Estate, Family Portrait and Ducktails got their start.

This is the first in a new Friday series on The Record. We'll be going around the country, asking why music scenes grow where they do.

This week, Ridgewood, New Jersey, a town that's

produced such red hot indie bands as [Senses Fail](#), [Vivian Girls](#), and [Real Estate](#).

How did this happen? Ridgewood isn't exactly a smoldering cauldron of artistic ferment. It's an affluent New York City suburb where you're more likely to see a polo-sporting jock twirling a lacrosse stick than you are a skinny-pants-wearing musician hauling a bass amp.

Or are you? Some would say Ridgewood's role as musical midwife goes all the way back to arts programs in the public schools.

"I started playing the clarinet in 4th grade," says Julian Lynch, a solo artist whose recent album [Mare was given "Best New Music" honors by Pitchfork](#). He thinks the attention given to the arts in Ridgewood's public schools is a major contributing factor to the town's wealth of talent.

"Music education is very good in Ridgewood," he says. "The arts programs are really well-funded. All of my friends who play music now were involved in the schools' music program in some way."

In 2009, 87% of the revenue for public education in Ridgewood came from local taxes — the majority of which are New Jersey's notoriously high property taxes. Seven of the nation's top 10 counties in median real estate taxes paid are in New Jersey (the other three are in New York).

In addition to public funding, an organization called the Ridgewood Education Foundation raises substantial private money from residents. The foundation's stated mission is to enhance the quality of education in public schools.

Alex Bleeker, bassist for the Ridgewood-based band Real Estate, remembers when school functions brought together kids who liked performing.

"Ridgewood High School hosted these things called Open Mic Nights. All of the bands that are in this indie rock scene now would frequent these open mic nights," he says, "myself, Martin Courtney from Real Estate, Matthew Mondanile from Real Estate and Ducktails, Julian Lynch, Evan Brody from [Family Portrait](#). It was cool, it was an opportunity for you as a high school student to showcase what you were doing on the weekends, which for a lot of us was worshiping bands like [Weezer](#) and learning how to play their songs."

Bleeker says that playing music in front of an audience made him feel like he was part of something. "We felt like we were in a scene when we were 14 years old, and that was a powerful thing."

All of the musicians Bleeker grew up with have since graduated from high school and moved away from Ridgewood. But Evan Brody, frontman of the band Family Portrait and co-founder of the record label Underwater Peoples, says that the group of friends that started playing together in school still uses the connections they made back then to put on shows and release recordings.

They'll be doing that this weekend at an Underwater Peoples' showcase in Brooklyn.

"We have sort of a bi-annual event where we all get together and play, just to hang out and share our appreciation for music," he says, letting me in on a secret show that his buddy probably didn't want him to share. "Matt Mondanile of Real Estate recently hosted a show at his mom's house which she didn't know about... ha, now hes gonna get in trouble with his mom."

With the growing profiles of bands from this area, Lynch says that these gigs are a way to have a more intimate experience with his friends' music.

"The last few times I've seen Real Estate I've been stuck in the back of a huge theater, and sometimes its cool to have just a small handful of kids in a basement."

Bleeker agrees, saying that both the line-up and the DIY feel of the event bring him back to his public school days. "I think the show this weekend will be an extension of what it was like to play in the high-school cafeteria with all of my friends."