

Jammin' after school

By Tim Wood

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COLUMBIA, Tenn. -- The air is filled with the soft, introspective songs with titles like "Dead Roses" and "Sorry for a Friend" as a group of students listen intently to the sound of guitar and voice.

A few moments later, the sound of distorted, amplified guitars fills the room as a jam to the classic rock hit "Stairway to Heaven" breaks out.

Welcome to the Guitar Club of Central High School.

Two dozen students gather after school twice a week in the graphic arts classroom of CHS teacher Peggy Neal to learn chords and riffs, try out new songs, make friends and just have fun.

The club was started this year by Neal and CHS Senior Zack Brown. Neal got the idea when she visited her former guitar teacher, who had started a guitar club.

After getting approval from the school's administration, Brown and Neal distributed fliers and otherwise spread the word about the club around the campus. Brown donated an acoustic guitar, which stays in Neal's classroom for use by students.

The club's meetings draw students with varying degrees of ability and a wide spectrum of musical interests.

Some students are beginners, while others have several years of playing experience and write songs, such as Brown and CHS junior

Patrick Rivera.

Rivera has written a dozen songs and considers his music a hobby. At one recent meeting, he performed his song "Sorry To a Friend," accompanying himself on acoustic guitar.

Brown has ambitions of being a professional musician. His family moved to Middle Tennessee so his mother could pursue a career in country music. Her career didn't pan out, but Brown hopes he can make it in the music business.

He plays in a band called "Voltron, the Fortified Funk Machine." The name is a working title that a student suggested when the band played at a school talent show.

Brown's band, which has been together for about a year, performs covers of songs by groups such as 3-11, Smashing Pumpkins and Pink Floyd, along with their own originals. Brown is the only high school student in the band. The three other members are college students.

Brown also performs solo, as he did at a recent meeting with a rendition of his original song "Dead Roses," one of about a dozen songs he's written. He considers songwriting his greatest musical challenge, and he tries to avoid "doing things that have already been done."

Brown describes the club as an "outside-the-class atmosphere."

"Everyone helps each other," he said. Around the room, students gather in groups of two or three, talking, playing, sometimes shaking hands.

"Half of these kids have never belonged to a club in school before,"

said Neal, who describes herself as a "very amateur guitarist."

The club also helps students unwind after a long day at school, Neal said.

Neal's classroom is larger than most classrooms, so the sound of students playing, singing and talking reverberates around the room. Posters of music groups cover the walls. Students wear T-shirts with names of popular artists such as the group Phish and guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan.

The meetings are informal, although occasionally there are speakers.

No one can predict if the songs performed will become popular, but for now, it appears that the club itself has become a hit at Central High School.