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## (Untitled)

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by Adam Lenk, student

When I was 12, I had a good friend named Max. My parents had recently allowed me to have a computer in my room, so of course, he and I would instant-message each other all day when we weren't at school. One day, he started pestering me to listen to a song by a Japanese artist called Gackt. I was determined not to listen to the song for two reasons: the first being the artist's name sounded like a sound a cat would make when it's trying to get rid of a hairball; the second being the name of the song was "Emu ~For My Dear~" (Romanized), and I had no intention of listening to a song about emus. When I finally caved and listened to the song, I decided to listen to it again and again. I asked to borrow Gackt's CD, and for a week afterwards, I literally did not leave my computer while that CD was playing. I had only the vaguest idea of what Gackt was singing about, but I wanted desperately to find out.

After Gackt, whose music could be described as anywhere between rock, jazz and classical, I wanted something different, harsher sounding. Dir En Grey was the next Japanese band I fell in love with, and since then there have been countless others. I stopped listening to American music entirely. My friends would ask me if I had heard some song by an American artist, and after a month or two of my saying "no" to every suggestion, they stopped asking. They thought I was in some phase of my life that I would grow out of and start listening to American music again, after I got frustrated with not understanding Japanese. My parents thought this too for a while.

Two years into my Japanese music obsession, my parents finally realized that this wasn't something I was going to grow out of soon. They recommended that I speak to a friend of the family who is a member of the Japan-America Society, and he took me to one of their meetings. There I met people more than twice my age, the majority of whom spoke Japanese fluently. When I was introduced to them, they all spoke Japanese to me. At the time, all I knew how to say was "good afternoon," so they reverted to speaking English. I disappointed them, and I was incredibly embarrassed.

My grandmother, in her attempt to get to know me better, took me to a Japanese steakhouse for dinner one night. She assumed that I could speak more Japanese than I could and volunteered that I speak to the Japanese waitress. Again, all I could say that would make any sense was "good evening," and, again, I was embarrassed. Later that night, my grandmother told my parents that I had done "very well" speaking Japanese to the waitress. It was a blatant lie, and I knew

it. After that, I started trying to learn useful phrases that I could use in conversation, instead of drawing on Gackt's lyrics, phrases like "You who I loved too much are on the other side of the wall, softly smiling."

It wasn't easy, and I didn't make much progress for another two or three years. It was just a hobby after all, so I didn't put much pressure on myself to really learn it. The only foreign language my school offered was Spanish, and I didn't want my parents to have to pay for a tutor, so I was on my own. I would sing in Japanese in my car alone or at my computer when no one was home. I wanted to be a chef when I grew up, and that was about it.

Over the last year or so, a little idea has formed in the back of my head somewhere, that maybe I could be a translator for the U.S. government or some company like Sony or Toshiba that does business overseas. When I started college, I finally started taking formal Japanese language classes. That little idea in the back of my head has turned into a job possibility.

Once I started taking classes, everything about the language seemed to fall into place: the structure of the sentence, the differences in formal and informal speaking and, of course, the vocabulary. My classmates would ask me for help, asking if I knew which particle was used to contrast two items instead of link them. I would be able to tell them, but when they asked why it was so, all I would be able to say was "It sounds right." I knew this because listening to music and watching TV and movies in Japanese had given me a significant advantage over everyone else in the class, even some who had taken Japanese previously in high school.

I'm currently in my second semester of Japanese classes, and I still have that advantage. But it isn't so much the listening to music in Japanese that has given me the advantage, but that I seem to have limitless motivation in that class, which is more than I can say for most of my other classes. Because I am always seeking to improve my Japanese, I integrate other areas of my life to benefit my learning. I work somewhere that has a one-hour photo lab where all the instructions on the machines are written in Japanese first, then English. I try to make it a point to eat at a local Japanese restaurant at least once a week and practice my Japanese with a waiter. Of course, when I watch TV and movies in Japanese, I listen specifically for the words and lessons I'm learning in my classes.

I don't think I will be able to satisfy my hunger for the Japanese language until I've lived there for years and have become completely fluent. After that, well, let's just say Cantonese has caught my ear as well.