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## Young band trades summer vacation for Summerfest

By **ANDY TURNER**  
Special to the Journal Sentinel

*Last Updated: July 19, 2003*

**Racine** - Playing Summerfest and recording your second album are not typical summer activities for high school students.

So far, however, the members of Forest Fire are having quite a vacation. The trio, which plays mostly instrumental music influenced by blues, jazz and hard rock, consists of two Racine Walden III High School students and one recent graduate.

Evan Johnson, 17, is the guitarist and frontman for the band, which also includes his brother, Nick, 16, on drums and bassist Shane Verwey, 16.

Veteran Milwaukee engineer/producer/musician Gary Tanin is helping the teenagers record a six-song EP this summer in Madison's Smart Studios. The studio, which is co-owned by Butch Vig of Garbage, has provided services to the likes of Nirvana, U2, Beck and the Smashing Pumpkins.

Tanin, who has worked with the BoDeans and Victor DeLorenzo among others, helped the band land a spot at Milwaukee's Summerfest earlier this month.

A local radio station promoted Forest Fire as one of the youngest bands to play the rock stage at Summerfest. Evan said it was an incredible experience.

"It was unlike anything I've ever done before," he said. "We had a decent crowd and it was really a good time."

Tanin's brother, who owns an instrument repair shop in Milwaukee, introduced him to Forest Fire. Evan and Nick's father, Scott, who also serves as the band's manager, is a frequent customer of the store.

Tanin admits he was skeptical at first but added:

"My thought was that anything they can do is incredible because of their age."

Tanin was especially impressed with Evan, whom he called a "virtuoso."

"Hey, this kid is 17 years old and he's playing songs that people twice his age can't play," Tanin said.

Evan cites acclaimed guitarists Eric Johnson and Joe Satriani and Milwaukee guitar slinger Greg Koch as influences.

Like Johnson and Satriani, Forest Fire mostly forgoes vocals on their songs in favor of guitar-based explorations.

"We're kind of into building melodies and songs on our guitars," Evan said. "We weren't really interested in singing. We wanted to go in a different direction."

Instrumentals don't always appeal to people, Evan said, especially younger listeners.

"A lot of people don't want to listen unless they're hearing vocals," he said. "Some younger kids will ask us, when are you going to do vocals? They don't realize that that's not our thing. But we usually do a couple of songs with vocals to try to please everybody."

Forest Fire has been together about a year and a half, releasing a 10-song self-titled debut in May 2002. The group has played at various festivals - including Racine's Harbor Fest - block parties and weddings.

The band will begin recording its new effort, "Lighter Fluid," this week in Madison.

Evan said more thought has gone into the music than on the first album.

He writes most of the band's songs and then the band collectively arranges them. Tanin is helping the band to flesh out songs before they head to the studio.

"We work on a song and kind of a sit on it awhile. (Tanin) has helped us to make more sense," he said. "The songs just sound more intelligent."

Evan will head to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the fall to study psychology, but he's pretty confident Forest Fire will stay together.

"We could do shows on weekends," he said. "I'll be in Madison, so it won't be too bad. We just won't be meeting as much."

Tanin said Evan has the ability to be successful in whatever he does.

"He can basically choose his direction," he said. "It's rare for me to run into someone that capable."

*Forest Fire will be playing at the Sacred Heart Church Festival in Racine on Aug. 8.*

From the July 20, 2003 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

### Forest Fire



Photo/Jack Orton

The Racine-based band Forest Fire performs at the Mountain Dew Rock Stage at Summerfest, one of the youngest bands to do so. The band has been together for about a year and a half and has already released one album.



Photo/Jack Orton

Evan Johnson, 17, plays guitar. He is a recent graduate of Racine Walden III High School and will attend UW-Madison in the fall.



Photo/Jack Orton

Shane Verwey, 16, plays bass guitar.



Photo/Jack Orton

Nick Johnson, 16, and Evan's younger brother, plays drums. Both Nick and Verwey attend Racine Walden III High School.



Photo/Jack Orton

A small crowd listens to Forest Fire at Summerfest. The band is working on a six-song EP this summer in Madison at Smart Studios, co-owned by Butch Vig of Garbage.

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