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## Meet the Kids Who'll Make 'Sing Street' Rock

One was in "Game of Thrones." One is still in high school. They all act and play instruments. And in a new show they portray scrappy Dubliners creating a band.



Key members of the "Sing Street" ensemble, from left: Sam Poon, Brendan C. Callahan, Zara Devlin, Brenock O'Connor, Gian Perez, Jakeim Hart and Max William Bartos. Timothy O'Connell for The New York Times

By Elysa Gardner

Dec. 11, 2019



"Is anyone *not* ready?"

Rebecca Taichman, a director known for her work with such leading playwrights as Sarah Ruhl and [Paula Vogel](#), was addressing a gaggle of young men, most in their late teens and early 20s, in a Greenwich Village rehearsal space. They promptly picked up guitars and other instruments, and, within moments, they were stomping and bouncing and raising their voices in song, giddily summoning the rock gods. "Nice!" one shouted, as another slid across the floor on his knees.

As Taichman's presence might suggest, this was no band practice. They were rehearsing a song aptly called "Up," which is featured in the new stage musical "Sing Street." Based on the [2016 film](#) of the same name, the show follows a group of teenage boys who form a band in the recession-strapped Dublin of the '80s. They're led by a lad named Conor, who hopes to win the heart of Raphina, a girl nurturing her own dreams of a modeling career.

For the musical, set to open on Dec. 16 at [New York Theater Workshop](#), the film's writer-director John Carney enlisted the Irish playwright Enda Walsh to write the book. They'd had good luck on another stage adaptation of a Dublin-set, music-driven Carney movie: "Once," which earned eight Tony Awards, including best musical, after transferring from the very same theater to Broadway in 2012.

For "Sing Street," though, they needed kids who looked like kids and could play pop-rock songs by Carney and the Scottish musician Gary Clark. The group they put together included the English actor and "Game of Thrones" alum Brenock O'Connor, who portrays Conor, and Zara Devlin, an actor from Northern Ireland, as Raphina — along with a clutch of affable and energetic actor-musicians, one of whom is still in high school.

Music runs deep in these actors' DNA; some have parents who've played professionally. Several cast members have, in fact, formed their own group, called Kings of Positivity. "Right now we exist on Instagram," noted Brendan C.

eye shadow. (That band's early MTV staple "[Rio](#)" is among the '80s tunes also featured in the show.)

Max William Bartos, the baby of the bunch at 16, first saw "Sing Street" — which was a cult hit at best — on an airplane. Then his agent called: "They need 16-year-olds who can sing and dance and play instruments," he reported. "Like, that's me!"

He and his cast mates described how their backgrounds — and their passion for music that was recorded well before they were born — make this show a serendipitous *gig*.

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## Brenock O'Connor, 19

**From** Worthing, England

**Plays** Acoustic and electric guitar, keyboards

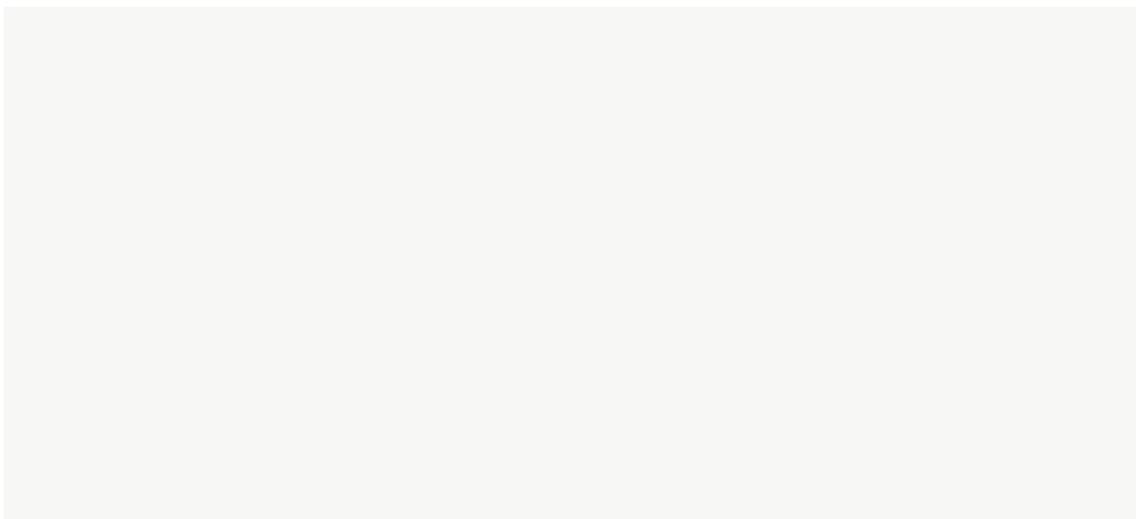
**Getting started** Began performing professionally at 11, and not long after was a "chubby little [Artful] Dodger" in a touring production of "Oliver!" Landing the role of Oilly on "Game of Thrones" didn't jade him; acting "has taken me places I never thought I would see."

**Getting into character** Conor is "the show's instigator" in setting out to form a band. "I've sort of been living Conor's story myself. I did a workshop for the production over a year ago in London, and since then I've been writing songs about a girl and just waiting for us to run away to London."

**Parental influence** "My dad is the lead singer of an Irish folk band back home. He taught me to play the ukulele when I was eight, and when I got older we upgraded to a guitar."

**Favorite '80s act** "It's this guy [BA Robertson](#); he's from Glasgow, and my mother's from there, and I sort of look like him as well."

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Zara Devlin portrays an aspiring model. Timothy O'Connell for The New York Times

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## Zara Devlin, 23

**From** County Tyrone, Northern Ireland

**Plays** Acoustic guitar, keyboards

**Getting started** "My mum sent me to an amateur drama school because I was extremely shy." Professional roles with leading Irish theater companies, including the Abbey, Gate and Druid, followed.

**Getting into character** Raphina, Conor's crush, is a year older and has stopped attending school. "I feel like she knows a lot more than a 17-year-old should know," Devlin says. The actress uses her accent for the part; attending school in Dublin, she learned that speaking differently can impart "another kind of loneliness."

**Parental influence** "My father has a Bruce Springsteen tribute band — and looks just like him."

**Favorite '80s act** "When I got this part I was listening to a lot of Madonna. I feel like Raphina watches the videos for 'Papa Don't Preach' and 'Like a Virgin' and tries to copy her."

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## Max William Bartos, 16

**From** Lancaster, Pa.

**Plays** Acoustic guitar, keyboards

started competing in lacrosse, but a traumatic brain injury sustained in a bike-riding accident turned him back to the arts. "I learned the guitar, started playing piano and got an agent."

**Getting into character** As Darren, the band manager-turned-band member, Bartos shares his character's entrepreneurial spirit: "Within minutes of meeting Conor, Darren hands him his business card. At my audition, they asked if anyone had a business card, and I just pulled out mine."

**Parental influence** "My mom's a piano player. My dad — I love him dearly, but I've heard him try to sing 'Roxanne,' and it's not great."

**Favorite '80s act** "Definitely Queen. Freddie Mercury is my idol."

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## Sam Poon, 18

**From** St. Louis, Mo.

**Plays** Acoustic guitar, keyboards, keytar, bass

**Getting started** "I was 4. My parents were both teachers, and at my dad's school they needed a little Asian boy, and I was the teacher's son." Much later: Broadway roles in "Macbeth" and "The King and I."

**Getting into character** "I relate to Eamon a lot. At the beginning he's got no confidence at all. He's sort of a lost soul and then he finds Conor, and through Conor and the band he finds out who he is."

**Parental influence** "My dad played in a cover band. He gave me the gift of music, and my mother gave me the gift of musical theater — she did community stuff when she was younger."

**Favorite '80s act** "I'd have to say Bowie and the Police, thanks to my dad."

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## Brendan C. Callahan, 19

**From** "Just north of Boston. I got this part from an open call there."

**Plays** Keyboards, acoustic guitar

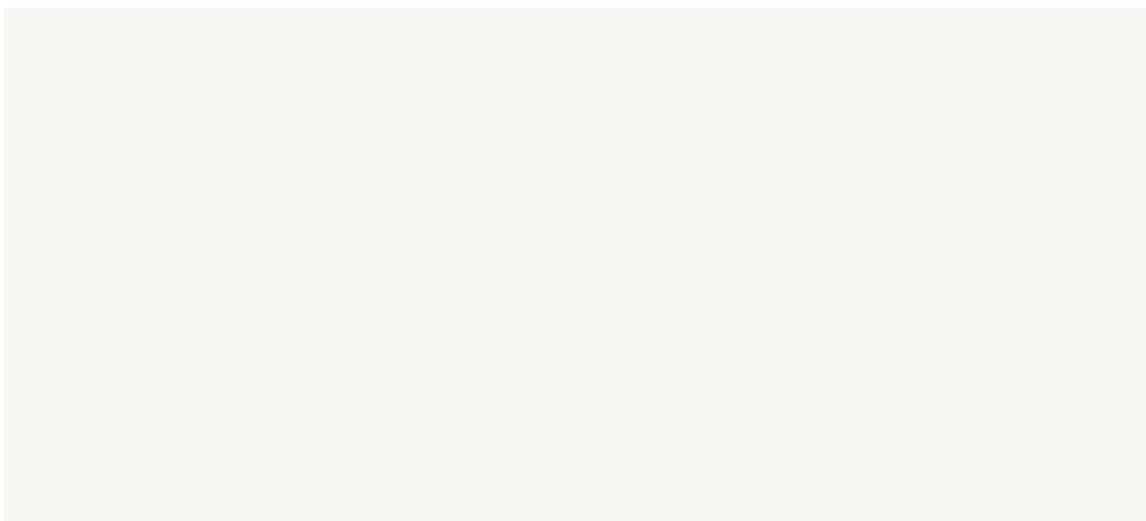
**Getting started** "My parents have video of me singing along to Disney movies and albums." Community and regional theater followed, and he also served as music director for a children's theater.

**Getting into character** "I play Gary, who I'd say is a little more cautious than some of the band members. I think maybe outside the band he's a little lonely."

**Parental influence** They took him to his first musical at the age of 2. "I was completely silent and attentive the entire time, and they haven't stopped being supportive since."

**Favorite '80s act** Billy Joel. "My parents have been to far too many of his concerts."

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Gian Perez has played guitar "as far back as I can remember." Timothy O'Connell for The New York Times

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## Gian Perez, 20

**From** Guaynabo, Puerto Rico

**Plays** Bass, keyboards, electric and acoustic guitar, vocoder

**Getting started** A guitarist "as far back as I remember," Perez earned music scholarships in his teens after his family moved to Orlando, but shifted his focus to acting as a high school senior. He's slated to earn his B.F.A. from the University of Michigan in 2020.

cocksure — he just knows he has skills and takes music very seriously.”

**Parental influence** “My dad produced live music events, and my grandpa on my mom’s side is a musician.”

**Favorite ’80s act** “I love Prince, but my go-to is Funkadelic, which is ’70s, and Jimi Hendrix, and then ’90s hip-hop.”

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## Jakeim Hart, 25

**From** Long Island, N.Y.

**Plays** Electric and acoustic guitar

**Getting started** Hart’s father, a musician, “started me on piano when I was 4.” Guitar lessons followed a few years later, “but music became a weird thing, because my dad is so gifted, and I never thought I could measure up.” A leading role in a school play spurred an interest in acting; Hart has since accumulated Off Broadway, regional theater and TV credits.

**Getting into character** “Larry has this elusive quality; he seems to have something figured out that the others can’t grasp. I don’t know if I’ve ever had that, but it’s nice to try to tap into it.”

**Parental influence** “My dad also had a band of his own; he performed a lot on Long Island, doing weddings and parties and club dates.”

**Favorite ’80s act** “My earliest recollection of a song from the ’80s that I learned to play is ‘Cult of Personality,’ by Living Colour. Great song, all-black rock band.”

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