



Feature

## “When will you be more than just a musician?”: Local musicians talk about challenges, stereotypes

Peer pressure and family expectations often force budding musicians to put their talent aside to pursue a more “realistic” career.

**Qistina Hatta**  
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**It's hard to explain what music does.** Even those who aren't constantly surrounded by chords and choruses can't help but feel a need to groove when a catchy tune comes on.

It makes you feel without thinking, often triggering an emotional response before our brains kick in. A tune starts and we inadvertently find ourselves nodding our heads and tapping our feet.

Music can stir up feelings of joy, euphoria, anger, grief, sadness — it has that effect on people.

From tribal beats to house anthems, EDM to classical arias, music videos to operatic performances, it's a universal language that we speak all around the world.

Yet we often take those who create it for granted.

In Singapore, choosing to pursue a career in the music industry is often seen as irrational and irresponsible.

Writer and classical guitarist Ivan Lim knows what that means.

The 57-year-old media veteran who has spent much of his career in the music industry often gets backhanded compliments that he is “such a dreamer” or “living a fairy tale”, almost as if to imply that the life of a musician should not be taken seriously.

“I often get told how I can be more than just a musician,” he tells The Pride.

24-year-old frontman of local indie band **Carpet Golf** Nathaniel Soh also often gets the same comment, about how he can “be a lot of things” more than just a musician.

The common trend to the comments they get is that having musical talent is cool, but that it's foolish to pursue music as a career — it's not possible to be just a musician.

### Making a living through music

To be fair, there is support for the music industry, especially since Covid-19.

Over the last 10 years or so, **Ministry of Culture, Communications & Youth's (MCCY)** has committed public spending on arts and heritage at about \$450 million every year.

The MCCY Arts and Culture Resilience Package pumped \$75 million into the arts and cultural community to support it during Covid.

There are different grants that artists and companies can apply for, such as the **Presentation & Participation (Extended Play) Grant**, which provides up to \$50,000 to support the creation process of performing, visual, literary, digital and multi-disciplinary art forms for up to 18 months.

For example, **local indie band Subsonic Eye** is touring the US in June under a **National Arts Council grant**. Carpet Golf, founded during the pandemic, has two members in Subsonic Eye.

But often, musicians are forced to face the harsh reality that a musical career by itself cannot sustain a family life in expensive Singapore.

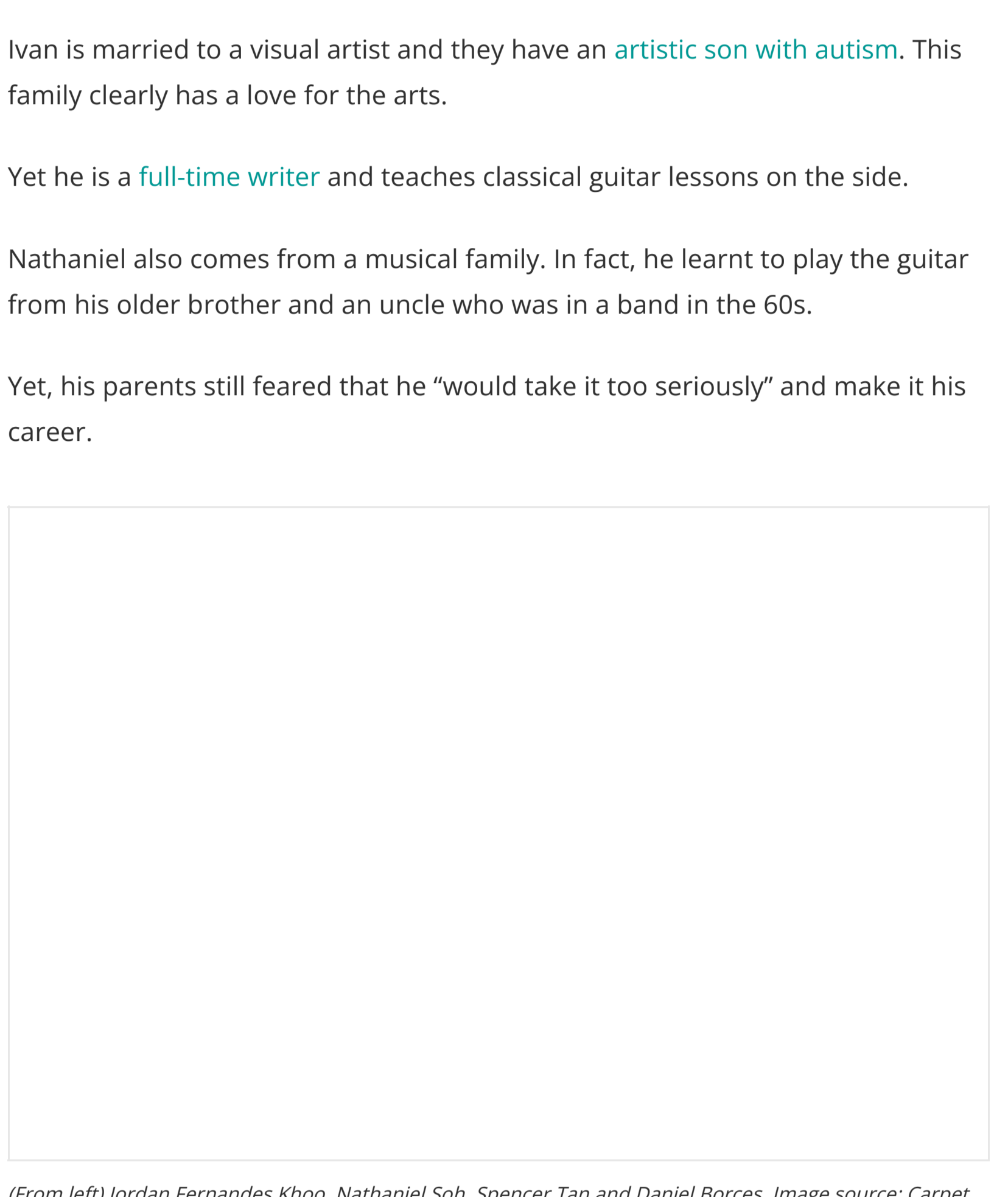
Music can bring peace to the mind and fire to the soul, but it doesn't always bring food to the table.

Ivan is married to a visual artist and they have an **artistic son with autism**. This family clearly has a love for the arts.

Yet he is a **full-time writer** and teaches classical guitar lessons on the side.

Nathaniel also comes from a musical family. In fact, he learnt to play the guitar from his older brother and an uncle who was in a band in the 60s.

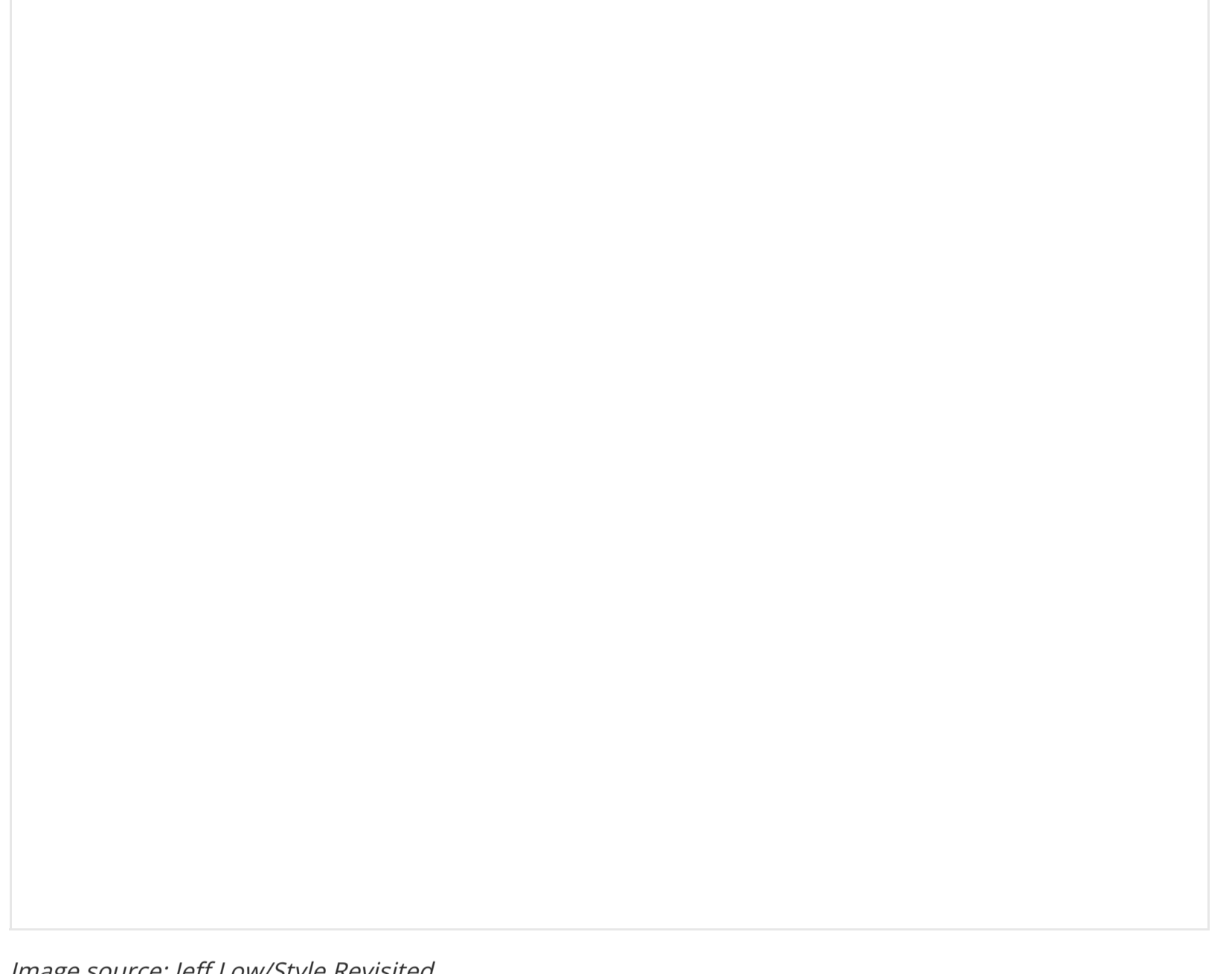
Yet, his parents still feared that he “would take it too seriously” and make it his career.



*(From left) Jordan Fernandes Khoo, Nathaniel Soh, Spencer Tan and Daniel Borces. Image source: Carpet Golf*

He had to reassure them that music was just a hobby to pass time during the pandemic and that he set up Carpet Golf with his friends because they just wanted a reason to hang out and make music from their homes.

### A lonely journey



*Image source: Jeff Low/Style Revisited*

Ivan shares that he has been solo for his music career, picking up the violin when he was six and the classical guitar at 10.

Now, he is used to being centrestage, but as a kid, he used to battle stagefright.

One thing that got him through the tough time was not to worry about how he was being judged, but to turn to focus on his audience, to become, in his words, “the most sympathetic person in the crowd”.

His purpose was to unify everybody in the room.

“Only music can do that”, he says.

Even though he was a bit of a prodigy when young, performing in concerts and music competitions before the age of 17, his dream of pursuing music as a career ended early.

He wanted to go to music school, but never got the approval from his father — he never thought a music career would be viable for Ivan.

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But nothing could stop Ivan from playing the guitar during his free time. He practised as much as he could while keeping a close eye on the music industry.

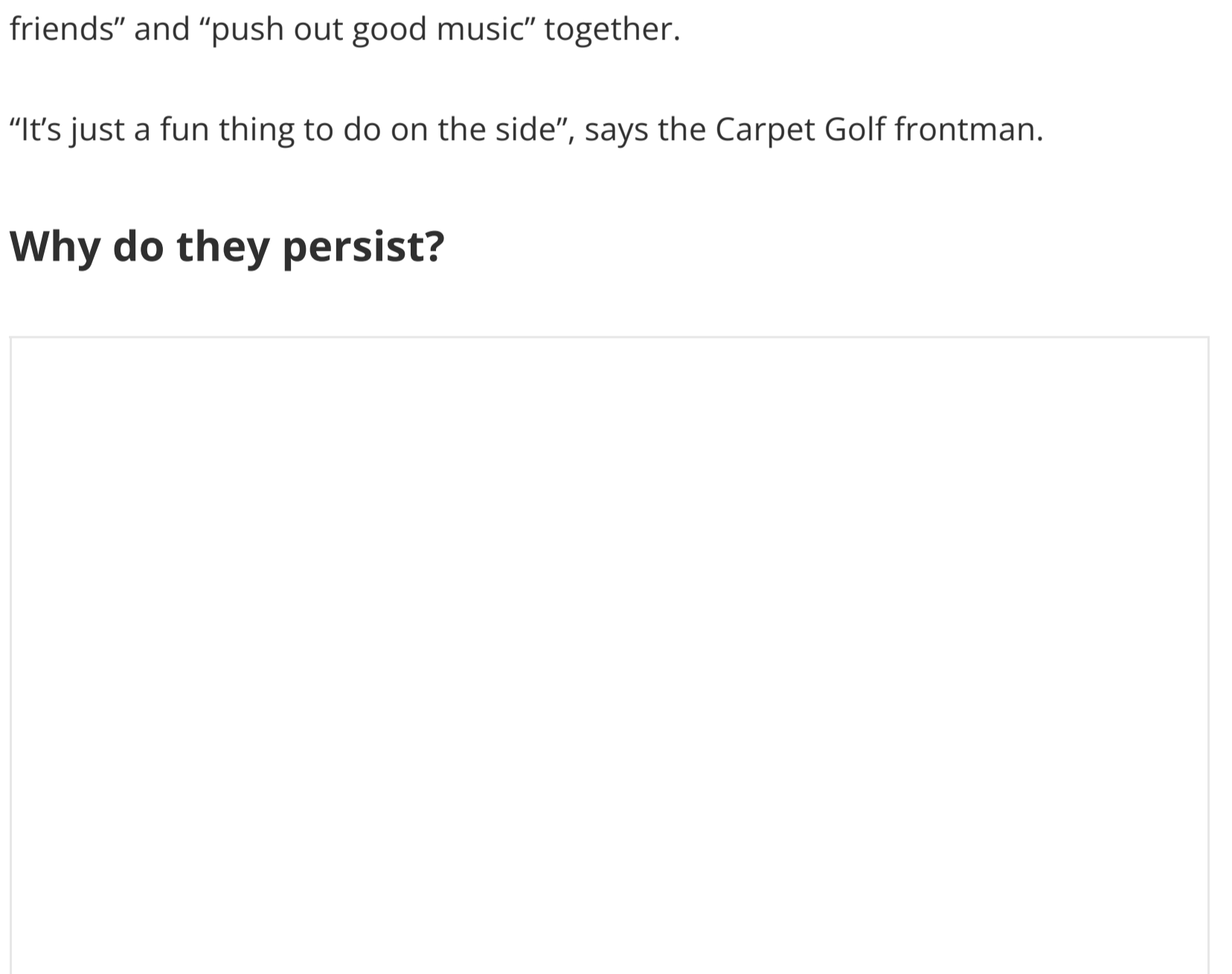
He taught classes here and there, and performed gigs from time to time, while concentrating on his career in writing and journalism.

Today, Ivan is a solo classical guitar performer and a highly sought-after teacher. Someday, he jokes, he may even pick up the violin again.

As for Nathaniel, he says that his current goal is simply to “hang out with his friends” and “push out good music” together.

“It's just a fun thing to do on the side”, says the Carpet Golf frontman.

### Why do they persist?



*Image source: Nathaniel Soh*

Both Ivan and Nathaniel agree that being a musician isn't for the fame or money (or lack thereof). For them, performing and creating music is all about “sharing something so intimate with so many people”.

It is a “magical feeling” that is often hard to describe. A special bond, alive only in that moment, that overcomes barriers — of language, culture, race or background.

Having both been exposed to music from a young age, both performers share how it is a way to express themselves in ways they can't normally do.

Ivan believes that music can do the only thing that his writing cannot say.

The classical guitarist says: “It's an opportunity to express something that writing cannot do. (When I write) I share my thoughts and a part of myself, but when you perform it's different. You feel it straightaway. The response (from the crowd) is felt immediately.”

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For Nathaniel, he says that he has had the “intentions to write songs” ever since he started playing the guitar at 16. Even if it was just using four chords that he knew, he wanted to create music with his friends. His dream? “Someday, to go overseas to perform.”

But for now, he is content to stay in Singapore and find a job that isn't part of the music industry. Thankfully, he has found something that suits his interest. The avid kayaker has since settled on a job as the head of media in a **local kayak company**.

Nathaniel says: “As a kid, I liked fishing and music. Now I'm doing both.”

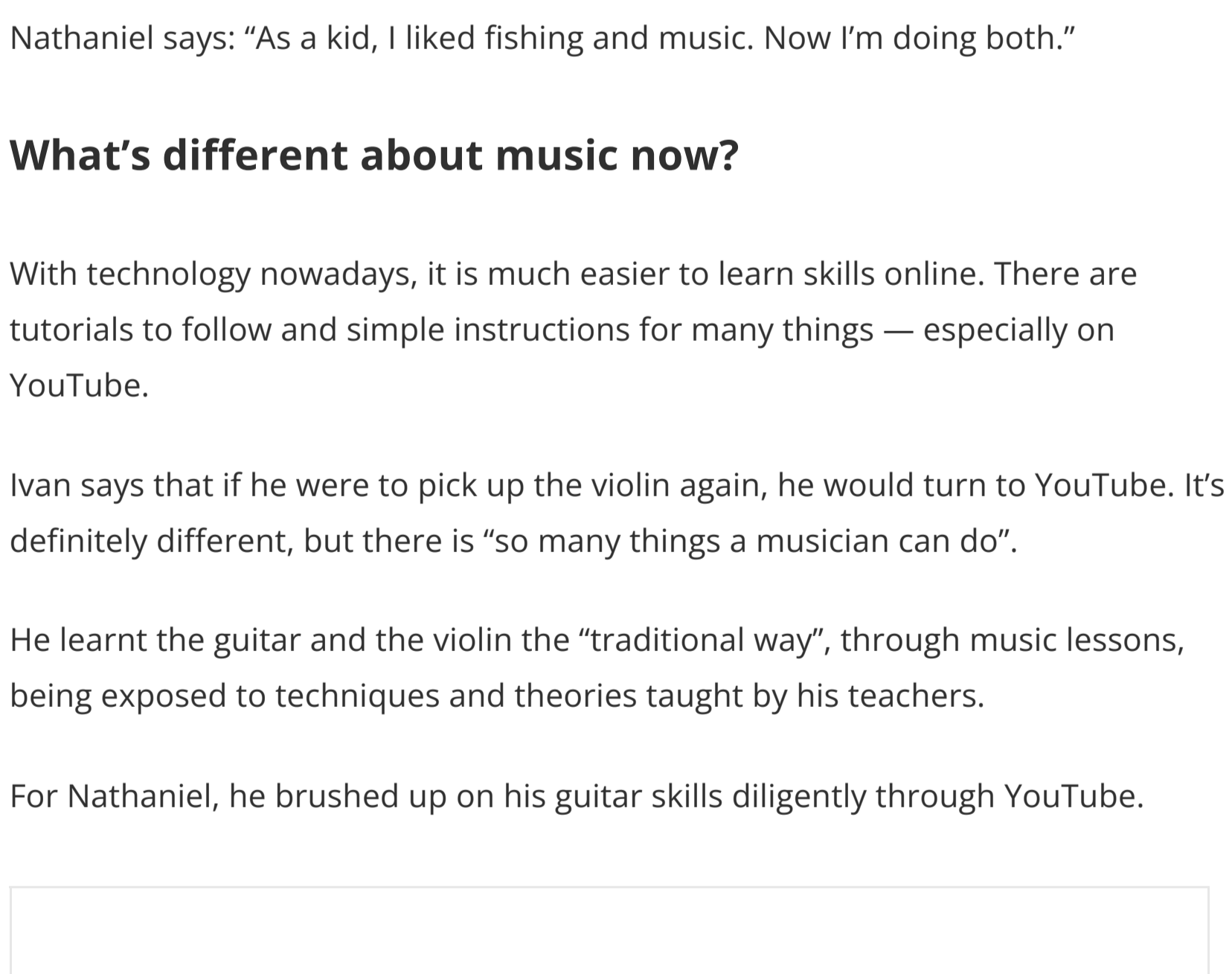
### What's different about music now?

With technology nowadays, it is much easier to learn skills online. There are tutorials to follow and simple instructions for many things — especially on YouTube.

Ivan says that if he were to pick up the violin again, he would turn to YouTube. It's definitely different, but there is “so many things a musician can do”.

He learnt the guitar and the violin the “traditional way”, through music lessons, being exposed to techniques and theories taught by his teachers.

For Nathaniel, he brushed up on his guitar skills diligently through YouTube.



*Image source: Qistina Hatta*

Before the Internet, many aspiring musicians had to depend on professional teachers to teach them to play their instruments. Now, they can get instruction and scores online, often for free.

Ivan says that with technology now, it is possible to “produce music on different platforms”.

“The traditional stage is no longer the only place bands should think about exploring,” he says.

Yet despite all these lowered barriers to entry, pursuing music as a career in Singapore seems a pipe dream. Because it is often tied to what many of us define as success.

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Peer pressure and family expectations can often stifle the dreams of those who dare to walk a slightly different path.

There are many up-and-coming young artists in Singapore — it is easier now, but a career in the music industry is still no bed of roses.

Says Nathaniel: “Manage your risks when making decisions in life. Read a lot about things you want to explore. Create your own path.”

Ivan's word of advice is more direct. He exclaims: “Go practise!”

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Top Image: **Ivan Lim & Nathaniel Soh**

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