HALFWAY THROUGH GIVEN

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Back when I lived in Poland, my IMDB and MyAnime-List were empty. There were always some shows in the back of my mind, but I never managed to commit and watch something from start to finish. This all changed when I moved to Nijmegen.
Here I started watching shows together with new friends from abroad, something I'd rarely done at home, which was so enjoyable that it quickly became a mainstay activity.

It wasn't long until I found out about *Given* – a manga-based anime about four students in a rock band.

SYNOPSIS

Mafuyu Satou, the first of our four main characters, clutches his guitar and slowly steps out of his dark and gloomy apartment into the bright and lively streets of Japan.
We follow Satou's road to school, through the streets, through the metro and all the way to the gates of his high school, as all that time he is holding tightly onto his guitar case.

The anime cuts to the high school – to class 2-10.
Ritsuka Uenoyama is sleeping at his desk, head hidden in his arms, as he gets woken up by his classmate.
This time we follow Uenoyama walking through the corridors of the school boredly, keeping his hands in his pockets as he struggles to keep his eyes open.

The scene comes to a halt as Uenoyama gets to his favourite napping spot, which is occupied by a curled-up Satou, still squeezing his guitar tightly. The two characters have a slightly awkward interaction until Satou, realizing that Uenoyama himself is a guitarist, starts pleading for him to fix his guitar's strings. After some bickering, Uenoyama gives in and reluctantly repairs the guitar, tunes it, and strums a single chord for Satou.

Satou, entranced by Uenoyama's talent, grabs at his shirt and begs him to teach him to play the guitar.
Uenoyama, uncomfortable and embarrassed by Mafuyu's insistence, refuses to be swayed and struggles to make up a reason as he's reluctant to part with his slow, cozy lifestyle.
Satou, refusing to give up, shamelessly ends up following Uenoyama to his band meeting, unsuccessfully hiding behind trees and trash cans until Uenoyama again gives in as Satou keeps begging him to let him listen to their practice. He lets him in and complains to the other band members, Haruki and Kaji, (whose relationship is explored more in-depth in the Given feature film, released a year after) the two other characters that cement the main cast, that he couldn't get rid of Satou on his way.

REVIEW

I'm only at episode 6 out of 11, halfway through, but I can already confidently say that I can't remember the last time any piece of media had me so invested in its world and characters. Three of the genres the anime is listed under are drama, romance, and slice of life.
And so far, everything the anime has been doing, it has been doing great.

The anime is slow-paced and explores the characters deeply before moving forward with the plot - it also doesn't feel like the two layers are separate - this is one of the very rare cases, where the characters, the plot, and the world feel like they fit together, as opposed to being a bunch of ideas hurled by directors and the staff.

The characters are also relatable, and face tons of issues and worries that we ourselves face daily, such as lack of motivation, failures, a haunting past, or even real disorders that handicap us throughout our days.

Given's engaging plot is topped off with charming art that goes well along with the story and keeps the viewer engaged with every scene - smooth animations, beautiful drawings, and backgrounds that set the tone very well. A core theme of Given (and its plot!) is undoubtedly music. It delivers in this regard exceedingly, as well as with its excellent opening and ending theme, which I never bother to skip.
Its soundtracks are clearly well-considered; they are the common threads that connect the story in a smooth way.
It's easy to tell that a lot of effort went into the music department, and they managed to live up and eclipse all expectations.

Shougo Yano, Satou's voice actor, has a beautiful voice that does justice to the equally beautiful character of Satou - his singing is guaranteed to pull on your heartstrings in ways that add to the already great storytelling of the anime itself. I can't help but look forward to hearing more of him.

There are very few shows I really could enjoy past their flaws. In the past, I would drop anime because of unsatisfactory animation and never finish series because of displeasing arcs, but Given is miles ahead of anything I'd seen.
Gorgeous art, superb sound, and it's all topped off with a beautiful plot, great character design, and scenes that keep me craving for more.

Even though I'm very difficult to satisfy, so far, Given has yet to let me down in a single aspect. It's a great show I'd recommend to everyone.

Post finish edit: It only gets better, so much better. I'm stuck rewatching clips of it and tearing up; This anime is really, really, really, really beautiful. It's probably silly to say it, but I don't see anything any time soon exceeding how Given made me feel and how reflective it got me.