

**Judges' Commentary on "Music from the Life of Eugene Ivins:  
Seminar in Composition Edition"**

by

**Sarah Ivins**

**"Music from the Life of Eugene Ivins" received an Honorable Mention  
in the University of Pittsburgh's  
2008/09 Composition Program Writing Contest**

The assignment asked for a biographical sketch written in an experimental style; it specified that Susan Griffin's "attempt to do what can't be done in more conventional forms of the essay" in "Our Secret" could be used as a model or "you may choose some other approach that seems best-suited" for your subject. Sarah Ivins chose the latter option, and she did so in a manner that makes an experiment seem less like an experiment and more like art.

Ivins' essay describes her grandfather's life, his increasing dementia, and her own acceptance of his compromised state. "Music from the Life of Eugene Ivins" is written with clarity and purpose, and it dips in and out of scene in a way that allows readers to picture both the action and the writer. Sometimes the medium really is essential to the message, and this is such a case. Ivins' grandfather was a musical man: he bonded with the author over "Chopsticks" when she was a child, and during his marriage to her grandmother, he scored music in her name. Because of this musicality, Sarah Ivins chose to represent his life in the form of CD liner notes. Her front page mimics the style of a CD cover and offers the title of her piece. A family timeline is provided on the inside of the front page, where one might find a list of band members. A playlist follows, offering seven "track" titles (for example, "Track 1: Young at Heart"; "Track 2: Chopsticks"; "Track 3: So In Love"), and each track represents one chapter of her biographical sketch. Credits on the back of the final page include her works cited list. Screened images of (we assume) her grandfather and other family members appear behind the text throughout her liner notes, and the text is carefully wrapped around these images so that design and content do not clash.

This composition will, no doubt, be of great value to her family, but it is also a more widely impressive adaptation of CD liner note format to tell a personal story. “Music from the Life of Eugene Ivins” demonstrates visual literacy, technical skill, and considerable creativity.

**To read an excerpt from Sarah Ivins’ essay, [click here](#)**