



## Who is Leonard Cooper?

**Oh, just some Arkansas kid who delivered the most memorable Jeopardy final answer of all time.**

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Media-dubbed "Jeopardy folk hero" a.k.a. "American treasure" seeks singer for the Leonard Cooper Sunshine Band. Or for Leonard Cooper and the eStem Street Band. Or for Leonard Cooper Drippin' in Swag. Or maybe for Leonard and his Olive Long-sleeves. The group's name is thus undecided, but to qualify, you must be available for all high school holiday concerts and talent shows, and you must be proficient at "Jingle Bells," "Carry on My Wayward Son" and "Sweet Child of Mine." Particularly "Carry on My Wayward" son, because, according to Leonard Cooper himself, "the thing that's so weird about doing that song with no singer, a third of it's just singing with no instruments." In Thus Undecided, Cooper, 17, plays a black Les Paul borrowed from his guidance counselor, despite the fact that a \$75,000 check (minus taxes) is en route

from Jeopardy!. He hasn't gotten around to buying his own guitar, nor has he gotten around to taking the driving test, even though he plans to buy a reliable used car, as well.

Grant Depoyster, 17, plays bass, and Troy Daniell, 18, anchors the whole affair on a seven-piece drum kit (behind a transparent sound-screen, since they practice in a cramped strip of computer lab, which is mostly long tables and computers, although there's an inexplicable piano in the back). Depoyster wears a busy caftan and a red do-rag with attached polyester dreads. Daniell wears a red tartan plaid skirt. Cooper wears a blue seniors 2013 t-shirt and a five-year-unchecked afro. But despite their mad style, they can't get the timing of "Hotel California." Cooper's good with the druggy, melodic intro, but when the other guys kick in, the tempo doesn't really pick up. Depoyster makes a speed-it-up motion with his hand, and Cooper messes with some dials to max the distortion. A third of the way through the song, they stop abruptly.

"I know you can't take me seriously when I'm wearing a dress, but we really need a singer," Daniell says.

"A singer would help," Cooper agrees. Because, if anything, Cooper is agreeable. Or at least, he's agreeable about things that matter. Hanging up his jacket doesn't really matter. Nor does his grandfather's opinion of his hairstyle. Nor does his homework, when he already has an 'A,' and he already knows the material. Nor does taking a stab at the final answer on teen Jeopardy!, when he's ahead by \$22,600, one opponent can't catch up, and he's pretty sure the other guy, a freshman who hasn't taken U.S. History, is clueless.

But some things do matter, besides being an agreeable bandmate. Going to church matters, because it makes his mother happy, and his mother pretty much raised him on her own. Captaining the eStem Public Charter High School quizbowl team and hitting up weekly trivia at local pizza joints matters, because these things are fun, and his friends are into them, too. Baseball practice matters, much more so than another stuffy interview (especially if it's not *Newsweek* or *TODAY*) or showing up to receive a certificate at a Little Rock City Board meeting. Getting into a good college matters, because when he thinks about having to go to a job every day, practicing medicine is the only job he can stomach. And investing his Jeopardy money matters, because \$75,000 will cover roughly three semesters of tuition and living at Rhode Island's Brown University, his Ivy of choice. (But Cooper is pragmatic. His favorite board game is *Risk*, so he also applied to Hendrix, Howard and his mom's alma mater, Vanderbilt.)

According to his mom, Judith Cooper, a clinical research coordinator at UAMS, Leonard learned to read at two. He proclaimed his interest in paleontology at three. He skipped third grade, and teachers wanted to skip him again, but Ms. Cooper objected. She didn't want Doogie Howser on her hands, abandoning his medical career at 19 for acting classes and a Roman holiday. Howser went off-air in 1993, three years before Leonard was born, but Gregory House just went off air last year. House, a guitar-god-cum-diagnostic detective who flaunts traditional methods and takes ridiculous risks

that pay off, is Leonard Cooper's hero. Dr. House plays by his own rules. So does Leonard Cooper. But unlike House, Cooper is polite, easygoing and, according to his mom, a bit of a shrinking violet. He hates public speaking, and she can't recall ever hearing him raise his voice. And that would probably be terrifying enough to remember, since his voice booms even at normal decibels. Cooper can keep a secret, too. What this means, most importantly, is that if he has a crush on you, you'll never know. "I usually stay pretty quiet and just chill, try to be as normal and calm as possible," he says. He's open to advice about new approaches, though, since he's not sure this one is working.

This also means that Cooper gets to keep his Jeopardy! prize money, because the winning episode aired on February 12, 2013, which just happened to be his seventeenth birthday. But all 10 Teen Jeopardy episodes were shot at the Sony Pictures lot in Los Angeles over two days of Thanksgiving break. And Cooper was under contract, which meant, for all of December and January, he had to forget that he delivered the most memorable final Jeopardy! answer of all time (Q: On June 6, 1944, he said, "The eyes of the world are upon you." A: Who is some guy in Normandy. But I just won \$75,000! [sic]), and that he did it in his older brother's untucked olive-green button-down and his own blue Chuck Taylor sneakers, beating out a duo of shrunken-stockbrokers in black suits, likely dashing their dreams of black credit cards. Of course, Cooper is protective of the stockbrokers, because that's the kind of person he is.

"You look different on TV. You behave differently," he says. "I know a lot of people didn't seem to like Barrett, but he was an alright guy. He was nice. He was very smart. I don't know if he came off as being arrogant or what. I didn't really understand. And Nilai was a good kid. He was 13, 14, the youngest one there...It's incredible that he got that far.

Unlike the other contestants, Cooper didn't study for his Jeopardy! stint. That's because he's been studying his whole life. His mom loves Jeopardy! and records it daily, so he grew up with the show. He was also a childhood fan of almanacs, encyclopedias and the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Now, he prefers movies to books. But if he had to go with books, he'd go with Robert Heinlein or Phillip Dick. "I like, not necessarily science fiction, but kind of the cerebral stories about morality and taking certain ideas to extreme, investigating certain issues like that," Cooper says. Which means that *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984* are among his favorite movies, even though those are actually movies based on books.

Cooper's favorite academic subjects are chemistry, math and American history, particularly the period "from about post-Civil War to the '40s or '50s. And some of the Reagan, Nixon, Carter era, too. I guess you could just say 1850 to 1990 or so." So basically, he's just not that into the beginning or the end – who needs the Revolution or current affairs? But he is into World War II, and he claims he knew the final Jeopardy answer, but it was temporarily swept away on a tsunami of adrenaline. He also knew that "To be or not to be" was from *Hamlet*, but he was only 95-percent sure, and he didn't have any points to lose guessing.

Things have been a little strange for Cooper and his Thus Undecided bandmates since the winning episode aired. And it's not just about the dreads and plaid skirt, which merely reflect eStem's baseball spirit week, in which Cooper chooses not to participate. (He doesn't like to break uniform: afro, Rush/Rolling Stones/Pink Floyd shirt and Chucks.) Last Saturday, Cooper and Daniell were playing trivia at American Pie, and something happened. "A few people recognized him, and then a few more, and then a lot of people were like, 'that's the Jeopardy guy,'" says Daniell. "I just took a step back and let the swarm come. I was like, we're his entourage. I do his hair."

Cooper is getting tired of random people asking him random questions in random places, like in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, or around school, or in the streets of downtown Little Rock. Or even on the *TODAY* show. "I thought I was just going to go on and answer some questions, like an interview. Then I came on the set and saw all these buzzers and podiums. I was completely unprepared. It was morning, 9:15, but my body was still thinking it was 8:15," he says. "I just try to roll with the punches."

The fringe benefits help. Questlove, the drummer for hip-hop band The Roots, famed for his roughly eight-inch afro, has adopted Cooper as his cyberspace progeny. "My unoffical kid" he tweets, and "im proud of my son...Best Final Jeopardy Answer Ever [sic]." During Cooper's New York press junket, Questlove invited him backstage at *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, where The Roots are the house band.

Of course, Cooper's win has spawned a plethora of internet commentary. But Rembert Browne's "The Jeopardy! Teen Tournament. Just. Got. Real.," published on *Grantland*, is the most-quoted among Cooper and the friends who keep him real, in part by posting silly pictures on Instagram. Browne coined the term "olive long-sleeve" and offered himself to Cooper as a swag intern, or swagtern. In the course of one band practice, Daniell dropped at least two references to the olive long-sleeve, and one of his latest contributions to Instagram is a Jeopardy! screenshot of Cooper, photoshopped to read "drippin' in swag."

But they haven't all been glory days, and Daniell has been around long enough to remember Cooper unformed. "Back in eighth grade, he was just on a guitar in class, playing Iron Man [by Black Sabbath], but it was Lava Man, because it was for one of his projects, and the 'fro wasn't there, the skill wasn't there..." Daniell trails off, mournfully shaking his head.

"Oh, it was really bad! It was 8th grade!" Cooper howls, pinching the bridge of his nose and doubling over in embarrassed bemusement. It's safe to assume that this was his exact reaction when surrounded by 115 of his classmates, during the final Jeopardy! viewing party at Gusanos Pizza. He had to watch himself, on national TV, responding to "Clavicle is another name for this bone," with a panicked patting in the general shoulder region and a breathless near-guess – "what's the, uh, like, the neck bone, um...collarbone?" He topped it off with an audible sigh of relief and gigantic grin. He's

Leonard Cooper, isn't he? He knows his resume is as overburdened with university-sanctioned summer engineering, science and gifted programs as that of any other high school genius, so he doesn't really have to share that information with the world. Instead, he chooses to tell Alex Trebek and TV viewers about his obsession with Jimi Hendrix.

"When he won, we were all screaming and pounding on the table, and going crazy," Daniell says. "And Leonard's just sitting there, so calm, sipping his coke." And forevermore, cool is a seven-letter word.