

At These Schools, Rock 'n' Roll is the Curriculum

Asbury Park Press on 05/31/07

BY KELLY-JANE COTTER
MUSIC WRITER

Kids take guitar lessons because they want to rock out.

So why wait until you've mastered bar chords? Why not rock 'n' roll from the very beginning?

Aspiring musicians — be they guitarists, drummers, bassists, pianists or singers — now have that option.

Rock 'n' roll schools are cropping up all over the place, offering students the chance to learn rock music and to perform it in concert. In Ocean County, there's the Val Monte Center for Performing Arts on Route 9 in Stafford. Monmouth County's programs include those at Rokit For Kids, founded in 2004 and based at the Middletown Arts Center at 36 Church St., and the Paul Green School of Rock Music, a national company that last year opened a chapter at 51 Monmouth St. in Red Bank.

Rokit For Kids and the Paul Green School of Rock Music will showcase their students this weekend.

Rokit For Kids will present a concert of classic and current rock music at 7 p.m. Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday at the Middletown Arts Center. The Saturday show is sold out. Tickets for Sunday are \$10. For more info, call the arts center at (732) 706-4100 or go to www.rockitforkids.org.

Paul Green School of Rock Music will stage a Beatles tribute concert at 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at Asbury Lanes, 209 Fourth Ave. in Asbury Park. Tickets are \$10. For info, call the school at (732) 966-1800 or go to www.schoolofrock.com.

These concerts aim to be more than traditional recitals, where parents endure a cattle call of awkward performances by frightened children. Rather, the rock schools work to ensure that their students are at ease onstage and can put on a professional-style show.

Fun is a priority

"We usually sell about 30 or 40 tickets to people who have no connection to Rokit For Kids," said Bruce Michael Gallipani, founder of the program. "People aren't just there to see their kids — they see a lot of talented musicians."

Students at Rokit For Kids range in age from 8 to 16. Students audition for a space in the program and already must be studying music with a private instructor. At the Paul Green School of Rock, the age range is about 7 to 17, and the school accepts beginners as well as more seasoned musicians.

At both schools, having fun is a priority.

"School of Rock is a lot more fun than a regular piano lesson," said Karlee Bloomfield, 14, of Ocean

Township, who has been studying piano "forever" and who joined School of Rock in December. "Everyone is really enthusiastic and positive, and you get to learn the music you like."

Bloomfield is a fan of Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin, and she was able to play the music of both bands in School of Rock tribute shows. Bloomfield and her boyfriend, Zach White, 14, of Ocean Township, will collaborate in this weekend's Beatles show. Her piano teacher at School of Rock is Andy Letke, a member of the Asbury Park-based Latin rock band deSol.

"Karlee has always enjoyed music," said her mother, Terry Bloomfield, "but since she started learning from Andy, he has been so inspirational. And now to have the opportunity to play onstage, she's really come into her own."

At Rokit For Kids, Gallipani creates bands by matching students with similar interests and skill levels. They then learn a classic song, such as "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend" by The Ramones, and a contemporary rock tune, such as "When I Come Around" by Green Day.

Those two songs comprised the repertoire of a band of some of Gallipani's youngest pupils — guitarist Luke DeTore, 9, of Freehold, and drummer Anthony Flora, 8; singer Matt Carlo, 11; and singer/guitarist T.J. Bent, 13, all of Middletown.

"I'm doing this so that maybe I'll get to sign autographs soon," Flora said.

His mother, Nancy Flora, said that Anthony has benefited from the group experience.

"It's not just him in his room banging on the drums," she said.

Matt Carlo's mother, Colleen Carlo, said that Rokit For Kids has taught her son "the importance of practicing. Now that he's accountable, now that he has to prepare for a concert, he's much more serious about it."

Gallipani puts it this way: "The difference between regular lessons and Rokit For Kids is like the difference between hitting balls in a batting cage and playing in a real game."

Mark Biondi, music director at the School of Rock in Red Bank, echoed that, saying the students get real-world experience.

"You see the power of kids who love music," Biondi said, "how they network, how they're creative.

"It's what we all wish we had, as performers. This is goal-oriented, and it's about working with the music that kids really want to learn."

The School of Rock Fest with Ween, Bad Brains, Bouncing Souls and others takes place June 23 and 24 in Asbury Park. Go to www.schoolofrock.com.