

## **Pounding it home**

**Top drummers and other LEAF headliners show the kids how it's done** by Pete Zamplas

When Billy Jonas closes Lake Eden Arts Festival this Sunday, as is his tradition, the found-percussion specialist will help sound out a burgeoning *new* tradition – that of local schoolchildren playing alongside professional musicians.

It's part of LEAF getting the younger generation involved in the creative expression of music, through its non-profit LEAF in Schools & Streets program that debuted at the festival's spring edition.

Here's how it works: Kids at public and private elementary schools, housing communities and community centers learn the basics of playing music in hands-on workshops. Then they can perform at LEAF – often on the Main Stage.

"That's so cool for the children," says LEAF Producer Jennifer Pickering, who, with the Asheville Area Arts Council and other entities, brought to life her long-time educational vision.

"The kids get several different kinds of experience with an experienced, professional performer – including actually being part of the [LEAF] performance itself," Pickering goes on.

"It empowers these kids," stresses the program's director, Kerri Hampton-Pyle. "They get to experience what it feels like to be on a professional stage, as a performer."

A performer with sometimes-adult-sized responsibilities, at that.

Explains Hampton-Pyle: "They get performers' passes. They have a stage call. They're treated as regular musicians. ... Plus, it's [presented as] a career option. And they learn about team-building, diversity and acceptance."

And thus they grow attuned to the beat of a different drum, so to speak. And by such distinctive drummers as Jonas and Hampton-Pyle's own husband – Artimus Pyle of Lynyrd Skynyrd fame – no less.

### **"Like popcorn in the microwave"**

Part of a blossoming cluster of similar programs, including Crescent City Mountain Summit – which brought together New Orleans students and Asheville mountain musicians at Swannanoa Gathering in July – LEAF in Schools & Streets debuted at the May festival with, among others, Baba and Mama Shabu (of The Magic of African Rhythm) and Pyle, who now heads the Artimus Pyle Band. (Pyle and the kids opened for seven minutes for percussion-heavy jam band Tribolotomee, headed by Pyle's two older sons, Chris and Marshall.)

Of course, Rome wasn't drummed up in a day.

"It sounded like popcorn in the microwave," Pyle admits of the kids' inaugural effort – in total improvisation, they pounded drums at different moments rather than attempt a synchronized group effort.

But it's all good. Pyle's not some exacting taskmaster out to mold perfect percussionists - at this point, he's simply spreading the fun.

"The look on the kids' faces when they played," he says, "was pure joy."

Pyle worked with 29 students at Asheville Montessori School for that first gig (his youngest son River, with Hampton-Pyle, attends the school). The children were especially young – ages 3-5, and thus could hardly be expected to appreciate their mentor's Southern-rock pedigree. He was simply River's dad – the one "with the cowboy hat."

Pyle says he demonstrated percussion instruments including shakes, chimes, bells, tambourines and steel pans. Then he got relatively serious, showing his students the proper way to hold a pair of drumsticks.

"Kids love to bang on drums and make noise," says Pyle. No groundbreaking news there. The novelty, he points out, was in having an adult actually *telling* them to make noise.

Drumming, claims Pyle, is also a great cardiovascular exercise and stress reliever. "Since 9/11, the whole nation's been stressed out," he offers. "I know what it's like to sit down and bang on my drums to get my tensions out."

## **Free to be**

Young kids who play music experience a boost in self-confidence, according to Hampton-Pyle. (Montessori student Sarah Moore came out of her shell from the program, confirms her mother, Laura Moore, who recalls: "Sarah had the time of her life, performing on a real stage with a real drum set.")

And Asheville drummer Billy Jonas – advocate of unusual, recyclable and homemade instruments, including the percussive wonders available in any kitchen cabinet - is likewise concerned with creating happier kids.

"[He] is putting a lot into [this program] from his heart," says Hampton-Pyle. Jonas earned a Parents' Choice Gold Award in 2000 for his how-to DVD *Bangin' and Sangin'*, and recently released *Everybody's in the Band*, an interactive video served up in a similar spirit.

"Children seem to respond best to songs that have nonstop participation," notes Jonas.

Still, the vital part of LEAF in Schools & Streets goes on off-stage. Recently, Jonas worked with students at Asheville's W.C. Reid Center, which offers after-school programs to at-risk kids. Singer Chuck Beattie spoke on the history of the blues to eighth-grade students at ArtSpace Charter School in Swannanoa, while The Georgia Sea Island Singers taught African-American call-and-response chants and gospel songs to fifth-graders there. And the Shabu family of The Magic of African Rhythm was at C.C. Bell Elementary in East Buncombe County last week, and are currently in residence at Pisgah Elementary. All performers are slated to play various stages at this weekend's LEAF, alongside their young protégés – typically a dozen kids per school who are chosen by random drawing.

Despite the input of their teachers, kids' musical experience will vary according to their age and background, points out Hampton-Pyle. The program director, a former historic preservationist, says she learned a thing or two herself when her son River arrived in the world.

"Once you have a child, it's not as important to save old buildings or dig up stuff from dirt. You live more for the moment."

For more information on LEAF in Schools & Streets, see [www.LakeEdenArtsFestival.org](http://www.LakeEdenArtsFestival.org)

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