

DailyFreeman.com

01/13/2008

Playing with the big boys

By KATE HEIDECKER , Correspondent



Myles Mancuso. (Photo provided)

Twelve-year-old musician Myles Mancuso is almost a decade below the legal drinking age, but that doesn't stop the pre-teen from wowing live audiences at bars and nightclubs across the Mid-Hudson Valley and Manhattan.

Starting Feb. 1, the Dutchess County resident will be performing the first Friday of every month at Keegan Ales, 20 Saint James St., Kingston, a James Street brewery known for its raucously fun music and down-home style. Playing music for adults twice his age doesn't intimidate Myles, however.

"My motto is the more they drink the better I sound," said Myles, who moves fluidly from the guitar, piano, bass and saxophone during his performances.

The product of a musical household, Myles said one of his first memories was jamming to James Brown in his living room. "I would watch tapes of James Brown and Ray Charles," he said. "I just loved their music."

The blues greats are still among Myles' favorite musicians. Now, he also enjoys King Curtis, Albert Collins and Freddie King. However, he isn't impressed by contemporary artists. Fergie of the Black Eyed Peas, a favorite of his peers in the tween age group, isn't winning any popularity contests with him.

"She does her music and I do mine. I don't want to put anyone down," says Myles when asked to weigh in on the pop-phenom.

Myles' father, Nick Mancuso, a drummer whose band often backs Myles during performances, saw potential in his son early on. He helped cultivate his son's talent by enrolling him in the Yamaha Music Education system, a music course that specializes in teaching children ages 4 to 9.

Education can only go so far, however. Mancuso said his son's natural talent was easily evident from a young age. By age 7, he was taking classical piano lessons, and by age 10 he received a bass guitar as a gift from his grandmother. He mastered the instrument in a matter of weeks.

When asked which instrument is his favorite, Myles is ambivalent. "I like them equally as much and I play them equally as much," he says.

Myles' resume is extensive and impressive. Honing his skills by learning from - and performing with - a number of legendary musicians has become a way of life for this middle school student. Woodstock resident Levon Helm, best known as drummer of The Band and for his popular "Ramble" performances, has said of Myles: "He may be a boy, but he sure plays like a man."

He has also earned praise from guitarists Les Paul and Zak Wylde, Conan O'Brien's bandleader Jimmy Vivino and Sid Bernstein, the producer who brought the Beatles to America.

Myles said he considers Helm, whom he has performed with several times, to be a mentor. "He started me off and now he is my mentor," says Myles, citing Helm's successful battle with throat cancer as inspiring as the music he creates.

Recently, Myles has reached some milestones. After a video of him playing four instruments in a James Brown tribute was featured on the main page of Yahoo, he was asked to perform at the halftime show during the New York Knicks basketball team's home-opening game at Madison Square Garden in November. The performance was one of the few times Myles had butterflies before a gig, he said, but added it is also one of his favorite musical memories.

"A lot of people showed up for that," he said of the performance.

Crowd participation is one of Myles' favorite things about performing. "Without people, there isn't a show," he says. "I like if (the audience) is enjoying me. If they are not enjoying the music I'm playing, then it's not good. I need the energy off the people to make the show work."

Despite his fame, Myles has yet to target an audience his own age, but breaking into the under-21 crowd is in his future. The popular Nickelodeon situation comedy, "Carly," recently licensed one of Myles' performance videos for use in a future episode.

In addition to performing music, Myles is also a model and an actor. "It's a different way to express myself other than music," he said.

While federal child labor laws state that minors may not work before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m., Myles said that these laws are not an issue when it comes to performing music. However, when missing school for acting (he recently appeared on the television show "Rescue Me," starring Denis Leary), Myles said he must prove that he maintains an 80 average at school.

As for adulthood, Myles said he hopes to continue on his current career path. "My goal is to make a living off music," he said. "I don't want to work in an office environment. I hope to always be doing something creative."

Myles also said he plans on sticking to Helm's career advice.

"He told me to always keep soulful and don't go to any bubble-gum pop," Myles said.

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