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# Lifestyle

## A band for kids about to rock

By Benjamin Soloway | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 24, 2013



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

**In his home studio in Jamaica Plain, Mike Irwin instructs members of the band the Brookline Village People: 8-year-old bassist Stefan Gordon and 7-year-old guitarist Catherine Macenka.**

Mike Irwin lives with his family in an ordinary house on a quiet street in Jamaica Plain. But his basement holds the potential for chaos. It houses more than 60 pieces of electronic equipment, musical instruments are everywhere, and children gather here

to play loud rock music, plugged in.

Irwin is calm in the midst of all this. In fact, he is in his element. Irwin teaches kids, some as young as 7, to play in rock bands. His oldest students are in high school.

The pop charts are littered with performers just out of their teens, or in the case of 19-year-old Justin Bieber, still in them. So it's no wonder that kids — teens, tweens, and those even younger — want to make pop music, too. And some parents, perhaps recalling dreary encounters with classical music when they were young, are happy to sign up their children for rock-band instruction.

“If you tell a little girl, ‘We’re going to learn a Taylor Swift song,’ she’s immediately excited to learn it, and she’ll go home and practice,” Irwin said. “If you tell the same kid, ‘we’re going to play Minuet in G again,’ and she doesn’t care about it, she probably won’t practice. But it’s important to learn a lot of the things that classical musicians learn, like good technique and music reading. I make sure that my students do all that.”

Irwin has not played in a band for two years, since his son Wyatt was born. He has three children now: Colton and Evelyn, twins, were born nine months ago. He wakes up early every day to take care of them while his wife, Rebecca Hansen, is at work as an outreach coordinator for scientific studies at Boston Children’s Hospital. Mid-afternoon, they trade off, and Mike heads downstairs to work. He rarely reemerges before 8 p.m., except to refill his large mug of tea, which is never empty.

He is 34 and tall, with a short beard and a soft voice. He grew up in the Berkshires and attended community college there, but left before finishing his degree.



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**Gordon plays the guitar during a rehearsal.**

“I was an electrical engineering major, which meant I was sitting in a cubicle all day writing code,” he said. “So I decided to move to Boston, try being a musician, and see what happens.”

He began playing in rock bands around town, and teaching guitar and bass lessons, first at Brookline Music School and later on his own.

Seven years ago he started grouping his student into bands. “It wasn’t my original plan,” he said. “It just happened organically.”

He currently instructs 11 bands, many of which are made up of students he also teaches one-on-one. He estimates that bands make up half of his business, which he supplements with recording work in his basement studio, especially during the slower summer months. He charges \$35 for half-hour individual lessons and \$30 per student for hourlong band practice sessions.

At their final practice before a summer hiatus, Irwin’s youngest band, the Brookline Village People, made their way through Cheap Trick’s 1978 hit “Surrender.” During a break to lower a microphone to the proper height for 10-year-old guitarist and vocalist Rosie Lacy, her bandmates began producing a brief cacophony.

“No playing between songs,” Irwin reminded them. Rather than raise his voice, he lowered it. The kids stopped right away. Stefan Gordon, the band’s 8-year-old bassist, and his best friend, 7-year-old guitarist Catherine Macenka, both tried unsuccessfully to hold in their giggles.

“All right, let’s do it again,” said Irwin.

Ten-year-old keyboardist Bis Macenka and 12-year-old drummer Caleb Macenka, Catherine’s older siblings, round out the five-person group. All five live in Brookline Village and attend the Lincoln School.

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*“They’re super motivated because it’s awesome — it’s a rock band. You can’t fight the energy of the group. You just have to gather it and channel it in the direction you want to go. If you fight the energy, it’s sort of hopeless. You’re definitely outnumbered.”*

It turns out that little Catherine was the catalyst for the group's formation.

"Ever since she was very little, Catherine has wanted to play electric guitar," said Lisel Macenka, mom to three-fifths of the Brookline Village People. "She's the youngest of four, so she does everything a bit young because she's trying to keep up."

A stay-at-home mom who used to work at a downtown corporate law firm, Macenka supports her kids' desire to play rock music.

"They all really like it, because it's the music they like listening to," she said. "I never played in a band. But who hasn't dreamt about it? And sung songs into their hairbrush?"

Every spring, Irwin secures a venue and hosts a concert for his bands. This year, he held the show at NAGA, a club in Cambridge's Central Square. Over 400 people showed up and paid the \$5 cover. Irwin donated the earnings to Zumix, a youth arts and community building nonprofit in East Boston.

The Brookline Village People played first, but they stayed for the whole show — which lasted more than three hours — to check out older groups such as the girl band No Mascara, which played original compositions. "The kids were mesmerized," said Macenka.

Irwin enjoys working with young bands, and he considers teaching music, rather than writing and performing it, to be his life's work. "I'm not trying to 'make it' [in a band] anymore," he said. "I struggled with it for a bit, after my most recent band broke up. But I love my life now, and it's hard to argue with that."

Irwin believes in the value of teaching pop and rock music as opposed to classical or jazz, and he has learned from experience that even very young kids can play well together in groups.

Still, anyone who works with kids knows that getting them to work together for long periods of



time on complex tasks that require concentration and coordination can sometimes feel like herding cats. Irwin's ability to keep his students on task awes even their parents.

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**Bis Macenka, the 10-year-old keyboardist of the Brookline Village People, practices at a music class in Jamaica Plain.**

"He focuses these kids," said Eva Katz, whose son Gabe, 12, has studied guitar with Irwin for many years. "It's a gift."

According to Irwin, the key to teaching very young bands is the music itself.

"They're super motivated because it's awesome — it's a rock band," he said. "You can't fight the energy of the group. You just have to gather it and channel it in the direction you want to go. If you fight the energy, it's sort of hopeless. You're definitely outnumbered."

Girls and boys are equally represented among Irwin's students. Anderson Mar, the general manager at School of Rock Boston, part of an international chain of music schools that teaches rock music to children and adults, said that the school has seen a sharp increase in female interest, but that girls still only make up about 40 percent of her clients.

"Girls are just as great as guys at playing rock music, for sure," said Irwin. "My bands know that."

Over the years, Irwin watches his students grow up.

"He's a mix between a teacher and a friend," said Daisy Walker, a junior at Milton Academy who plays guitar in No Mascara.

Irwin does not leave the house many weekdays, and he has never held a 9-to-5 job, but he would not have it any other way.

"At the end of the day, I'm always tired, but I never feel like I've wasted the day," he said. "It's easy to forget that I get paid for what I do. I really love it."

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