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Little drummer boy has big talent

He's got the beat: At 3, Bloomfield Hills toddler basks in national attention

Delores Flynn / The Detroit News

BLOOMFIELD HILLS -- Julian Pavone grabbed his sticks on a recent Monday afternoon and took a seat behind the 20-piece drum set in his basement for a one-man jam session.

As strains of the Commodores' "Brick House" poured from a nearby stereo, Julian quickly got into the groove, sticking out his tongue as he bobbed his head to the beat.

Tapping the ride and crash cymbals and thumping the bass with his stockinged right foot, the long-haired drummer played with the ease of someone who's been doing it his whole life. And at 3 years old, he has.

"He plays like a 30-year-old with such precision, definition and focus that it's incredible," said Grammy Award-winning guitarist and producer Michael J. Powell.

Julian, dubbed the world's youngest drummer on his Web site, www.littledrummerbaby.com, gained national recognition for his skills at age 2 and will be featured next Monday on "Oprah," along with other extraordinary children.

"Playing the drums is so cool," Julian said, grinning at his proud father, Bernadino Pavone, before slowing things down with Journey's "Lights."

At 15 months, Julian landed his first contract playing with United Drum line, which performs at half-time shows and events in Cleveland. He has recorded a CD, "Go Baby," with classically trained bass player Ralphe Armstrong and regularly jams with Powell, who has worked with industry legends Anita Baker, Aretha Franklin and Patti LaBelle.

"You can tell he has a passion for it because he's never forced to play. He's always asking to get on the drums," said Powell, who's producing and network-shopping a reality television show called "Finding Julian's Band."

Julian's parents, Lisa, a family doctor who specializes in vascular disease, and Bernadino, who develops international businesses, say their son's love for music started in the womb. His

sister Annalisa, 2, sings and plays piano.

"I would put headphones on my wife's stomach and he would kick to the beat with such a solid rhythm," said the elder Pavone, who has played drums since the second grade. "I strapped him in a baby (sling) at 3 months to practice the drums and Julian reached up and grabbed my drum sticks from me and started playing on the tom-tom. By 9 months he could do drum rolls and I knew he had a gift from God."

Some of Julian's musical influences include the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Earth Wind and Fire, Miles Davis and James Brown, and he's a regular at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. One of his favorite songs to play is "Give up the Funk" by Parliament.

"I like to play funk," Julian chirped after taking a break from drumming.

"We're really trying to expand his horizons to all genres," Bernadino Pavone added.

The energetic tyke, who also dabbles with the saxophone and piano, receives music instruction every two weeks and practices the drums about two hours daily.

"He's a little too young to read music, so we're developing his ear for music, which is a great skill for any musician," said music teacher Francesco Cavallini of the Flint Institute of Music. "If you can't really hear music, you're just a robot when you play. We're working on rhythms and from there it will be melodies."

"He's truly a brilliant kid because he can pick up the most difficult passages of music. When I first played with him at 19 months he was playing a 7/4 rhythm, which is seven beats a measure, and then started subdividing it. That's something most young musicians can't do," added Armstrong, a Detroit native who jammed with Julian and Powell earlier in the day.

To further his development, drum teacher Steve Badalament of Innovation Drums in Bloomfield Hills is in the process of completing a line of drums, called Julian Drums, that are more suitable for children. Julian has gone from playing drums in a high chair to standing and now sits on a small stool. Badalament has built drums for Beatle Ringo Starr and Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones.

As Julian continues to hone his talent, Bernadino Pavone said that no matter where this journey takes them he just hopes "music continues to make Julian happy."

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