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University Liggett drum prodigy, 3, shows off his chops at school concert

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BY KIM NORTH SHINE
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

From the time Julian Pavone was in the womb, his little limbs had rhythm, going thump, thump in time to music held by dad near mom's rounding belly.

Three months out of the womb, Julian's tendency to carry a beat showed itself when he grasped the drumsticks that dad, Bernardino Pavone, was using to play drums. Julian sat captivated, strapped to dad in a baby pack.

By 20 months, pacifier still in his mouth, Julian, who lives with his dad and mom, Dr. Lisa Pavone, in Bloomfield Hills, was traveling across the country appearing on national TV shows, documented in national publications and featured in the 2007 "Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Remarkable ... Revealed."

Now 3 years old, Julian is a full-fledged

PHOTOS

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(ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press)

Bernardino Pavone, 43, watches his 3-year-old son, Julian Pavone, warm up before a performance at the University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods on Nov. 15. Julian's parents say he has shown an extraordinary ability with rhythm since he was in the womb.

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professional drummer endorsed by major companies, playing with seasoned pros and recording music to sell. He's started pre-K classes at University Liggett School in Grosse Pointe Woods and is becoming the littlest big man on campus.

"I'd hang out with him," one of his older Liggett schoolmates said last week after watching Julian play with two Liggett schoolmates and three internationally renowned musicians.

The concert, which attracted more than 250 guests, including Liggett students and teachers, parents and Julian's family, was Nov. 15 in Liggett's auditorium.

The musicians played three songs: "Brick House" by the Commodores, an original jazz song written by Ralphe Armstrong and "Give Up the Funk" by Parliament, providing a jazzy kick-start to a gray Thursday morning.

Three sets of drums -- Julian's in the center, Liggett Upper School senior Michael Ignani of Grosse Pointe Woods to Julian's right and Liggett eighth-grader Christopher Monsour of St. Clair Shores to Julian's left -- fronted the stage.

The ULS Trio, as they were called, jammed with three accomplished musicians.

There was Michael J. Powell, a Grammy-winning guitarist from the Detroit area who has worked with Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker, Grover Washington Jr. and many others.

Playing keyboard was Rocky Seprino, a keyboardist, composer and music producer, director, editor and writer.

Playing bass was Ralphe Armstrong of Detroit, who has recorded with Julian, taught music and played around with artists such as Herbie Hancock, George Duke, Carlos Santana, Buddy Rich and B.B. King.

As Julian played, the audience could see glimpses of his forehead but mostly just two little drumsticks flying in the air as if moving on their own -- yet connecting with the drums at all the right times. After his stool was lifted, Julian's baby face, which is cradled in soft ringlets of shoulder-length hair, was visible as he jammed, bounced and even sweated.



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Julian showed that despite his way with the drums , he is still only a 3-year-old, and as 3-year-olds will do, he occasionally did his own thing by rat-a-tat-tatting when he should have been holding his sticks still between songs.

Dad would gently and quietly remind Julian to wait until the right time to play.

"He has got some energy. I love that. ... When he wakes up in the morning, he's ready to go," said Rich Fanning, Liggett's instrumental music teacher whose efforts to emcee the show were punctuated against script by Julian's drumming.

In introducing Julian -- who prefers Earth, Wind & Fire over children's artist Raffi -- Fanning, of Grosse Pointe Park, joked, "He's one of those kids, you know, you run into every week."

Later in the show, Fanning told the audience about the rewards Julian is bringing to the school, where he's been a student for just a few months.

"There aren't any other 3-year-olds who have endorsements from major drum companies," Fanning said.

"All because of Julian," he said, the school has a contract with Vic Firth to be provided with percussion tools such as drumsticks and mallets. Julian's endorsement relationship with Sabian cymbals is leading to a similar agreement between University Liggett and Sabian.

At 20 months old, Julian recorded his first CD, "Go Baby!" with Armstrong. Julian has performed live on numerous radio stations, for the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers, at a VIP party for the Chicago Cubs season home opener, at a House of Blues and at the Cleveland Grand Prix opening ceremonies. He also played at the NBA semifinals for the Detroit Pistons and has inspired a series of children's books, as well as the creation of a clothing line in his name.

In February, he was honored with the 2007 Rock and Roll Lifetime Achievement Award by the Hard Rock Cafe.

When the music starts again, Julian's head bounces, his body moves as his foot hits the bass and his sticks cycle around the snare, cymbal, etc. He is feeling the music. It's easy to see in his facial expressions and body movements.

He loses his place once, and with a focus and concentration not typical for a child his age, he catches up with the music.

After the show, his parents recounted the days when Julian was drumming in utero.

"It was unreal," his mother recalled of Julian's extraordinary movement in the womb. "I probably didn't realize how unusual it was at first. It was my first pregnancy and I wasn't sure what was normal, but

during my second pregnancy I knew for sure, he was unusual."

The fast-hand drumming that he does could be in the genes. Dad is also a drummer, and Mom is a vascular surgeon who uses her hands for a living.

As Lisa Pavone says this, 21-month-old daughter Annalisa pretends to play at a keyboard.

"We've always surrounded them with music," she says.

Julian plays in the lower level of their home. Dad is the main manager behind Julian's mini empire.

"He pays me with a cup of coffee each day," Julian's dad says, laughing.

To watch Julian Pavone play, go to www.julianpavone.com or plug in his name at www.youtube.com.

KIM NORTH SHINE can be reached at 313-223-4557 or kshine@freepress.com.

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