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How **Julian Pavone**
of Bloomfield Hills
formed his own **band**,
cut **two CDs**, starred in
a reality TV pilot, **AND**
whipped up an **invention** -
all by age 3

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Photo by Daniel Lippitt

The Real Kid Rock

Bloomfield Hills toddler drums his way into stardom

By Laura Maniaci Photos by Daniel Lippitt and Justin Dennis

When Julian Pavone had trouble falling asleep as a baby, Lisa Pavone would sing him into slumber with “Lights” by 1980s rock band Journey. What the Bloomfield Hills mom, and dad Bernadino Pavone, never expected was that Julian would be jamming the same song in perfect rhythm on the drums with his own rock band – as a toddler.

Or that 3-year-old Julian's advanced musical talent would also land him guest spots on *The Martha Stewart Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Inside Edition*, and numerous other local and national networks; full endorsements by three music industry giants; a documentary on his life filmed by a major network in South Korea; recognition in *Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Remarkable Revealed* 2007 edition; a show headlining at the House of Blues in Cleveland; the release of his first CD, titled *Go Baby!* with legendary Detroit bassist Ralphe Armstrong; a reality TV show pilot; and an invention.



The Pavones (from left): Annalisa, Bernadino, Lisa and Julian, who's wearing his "Finding Julian's Band" T-shirt. Photo by Daniel Lippitt

"He has such an extraordinary gift; it's a gift from God," says 50-year-old Armstrong, who's played bass with everyone from jazz great Miles Davis to the John McLaughlin-led jazz-rock fusion Mahavishnu Orchestra to Chaka Khan. Armstrong has become Julian's mentor, and is also host of Julian's pilot, *Finding Julian's Band*. Julian's gift still needs nurturing, Armstrong says, "but I've never seen anything like it. By the time he's 5, he'll be a prodigy."

When asked what *he* thinks about his rapid rise to stardom, Julian responds like a 3-year-old, a fact that's easy to forget. He keeps the conversation to toys, friends and cartoons – and lets his drumsticks do the rest.

BORN TO ROCK

When Lisa, 31, was pregnant with Julian, he would kick to a beat in her womb. "It felt like a heartbeat," she says. Bernadino, 42, would play The Beatles music to Lisa's tummy; Julian, who was a breech baby,

would kick to the rhythm. "I'd take the music away and he'd stop, then put it back and he'd start again," says Bernadino, who started playing drums in second grade.

Bernadino practiced all of the time with an infant Julian by his side in his baby carrier, ears plugged. "I figured what a great way to play drums and keep an eye on my son," he says. Then, when Julian was 3 months old and sitting on Bernadino's lap, "he just reached up, grabbed the drumsticks and started playing with his own hands."

Says Lisa, a University of Michigan Health System family practice physician and assistant professor of surgery at the Livonia Vein Center: "He was able to hold the drumsticks at 3 months old; developmentally, for his age, it was definitely different."

By 6 months, Julian was playing some form of drum rolls (by no means perfect, says Bernadino); at 9 months he was playing his own drum set from his high chair – pacifier and all.

At almost a year and a half, Julian's skills reached a point where, Lisa says, "sometimes I couldn't tell if it was Julian or Bernadino playing drums in the basement."

Now, says Bernadino, "he's better than me and I've been playing for 35 years!"

Bernadino says he's still amazed daily at the new techniques his toddler picks up on the drums. "It's not taught," he says. "No one taught him this. He just listens to music and then plays it."

Julian, who practices for up to two hours every day to tracks by artists such as Led Zeppelin, The Beatles and the Commodores, can jam along with about 250 songs by memory. He most recently figured out how to play double bass, which can be challenging to learn for many adults, just by watching his dad.

But Bernadino and Lisa say Julian's passion is inherent; they have never pushed him.

"He's always asking us to play," says Lisa, adding that she often has to persuade Julian to stop playing to take his nap or do other "kid" things. "He just loves to play. He plays for himself and he likes to play for people. He loves to see people's reaction."

ROCK ON

At 19 months, Julian played to his first crowd during a halftime show at an NBA Cleveland Cavaliers game. He performed as the youngest member, by 16 years, of the United Drum Line, an Ohio-based nonprofit musical arts program that fosters youth talent



Rocky Seprino, producer of Julian's reality TV pilot, has become buddies with the 3-year-old, whom he adores. Photo by Daniel Lippitt

through performances at professional sporting events.

Bernadino, the CEO of a privately held company that helps build national and international companies in the financial services and entertainment industries, met United Drum Line founder William Winfield in 2005 during a business trip. "I said, 'You've got to let my

son audition. How old is your youngest member?' " recalls Bernadino. Winfield told him 16, and asked how old Julian was. "I said 15," says Bernadino.

Winfield was confused when a 15-month-old was carried into the room, but when Julian picked up the "big, fat" marching band drumsticks and started playing



Ten-year-old guitarist Alex Raz and 8-year-old vocalist Vincent Fondale recorded a CD with Julian and legendary Detroit bassist Ralphe Armstrong; the album, featuring rock/funk covers, is set to be released in early 2008. Photo by Justin Dennis

drum rolls, "William took out the contract and signed him right there," says Bernadino.

Winfield put Julian in the public eye first, and the little drummer with the huge personality has been in high demand since. Performances for the Chicago Cubs Opening Day, House of Blues in Cleveland, Detroit Pistons half time show during the Playoffs and Woodward Dream Cruise followed, all before Julian reached the age of 2. He was presented with a 2007 Rock and Roll Lifetime Achievement Award at The Cleveland Hard Rock Café, and, in response, Michigan State Senator John Pappageorge issued a Special Declaration of Tribute congratulating Julian on his amazing ability and potential.

Between March and May of 2006, Julian appeared on *The Martha Stewart Show*, *MSNBC With Keith Olbermann*, *Good Morning America* and *Inside Edition*. Numerous other local and national networks, as well as Seoul

Broadcasting System in Korea (Julian's heritage is Italian, Syrian and Korean) have covered his story.

SUPPORT FROM THE MUSIC WORLD Three major instrument manufacturers also took notice, signing Julian for full endorsements, and he now only plays with their products. Canada-based Sabian, one of the world's largest cymbal manufacturers, sent him 30 cymbals and a 40-inch gong when they brought him on board.

Innovation Drum Company, a Bloomfield Hills-based firm, has built and delivered custom kits to some of the world's finest drummers, including Ringo Starr, Rikki Rockett of Poison and Cindy Blackman of Lenny Kravitz. Now the company has handcrafted an heirloom drum kit with five toms, three bass drums and two snares for Julian, their youngest represented artist.

Stephen Francis Badalament, a Bloomfield Township resident,

owner/president of Innovation Drum Company and trained classical percussionist, has become not only Julian's drum maker, but a friend and teacher. "Julian is a boy with endless energy and boundless talent. He plays things that kids of 12 and 13 can't play," Badalament says. "The most salient thing I remember about Julian the first time I saw him play was the determination, concentration and look of purpose in his eyes," he continues. "Man, he was only 2 years old but he looked and acted like a drummer ready to 'cut heads' with another drummer ... it was like this out-of-body experience of seeing an adult trapped in a baby's body. That's the phenomenon of Julian."

Badalament says now that Julian has graduated out of his high chair, his true ability is shining. "Julian is a brilliant bass drum pedal player. Really, he's amazing. He can kick a funk or a rock beat standing up to fast tempo and he can keep this thing going.

"The most amazing thing I witnessed in the past couple of months," he says, "is that Julian is starting to sit down on a drum throne and get more relaxed behind the drums. He's playing a little double bass drum pedal and it shows that this little guy is no fluke. Many adults cannot even do this."

Badalament raved to Vic Firth, owner of Boston-based drumstick and mallet (used for such percussion instruments as gongs, suspended cymbals and tam tams) manufacturer Vic Firth, about this new young talent. After hearing Julian play, Firth signed him to represent the brand, as well.

"Any kid can get a pair of sticks and whack away at the drums," says Firth. But with Julian, he says, "It's amazing what he's already induced. He's helping bring music to young people and we support what he's doing."

Vic Firth even created Julian Pavone Signature Series custom wood-tip drumsticks in his honor.

MAKING HIS MARK

Rocky Seprino of West Bloomfield-based Rocket Productions, a film

and video production and post-production company, met Julian through a mutual friend of Bernadino, Michael J. Powell, who produced Detroit R&B/soul artist Anita Baker's *Rapture* album. Seprino was so inspired by Julian, his company produced a prototype of a TV pilot called *Finding Julian's Band*. The show, hosted by bassist Armstrong, follows Julian on his journey finding a band. After auditioning talented kids from the region, the producers found 8-year-old singer Vincent Fondale and 10-year-old guitarist Alex Raz, both of Cleveland, as well as Julian's cousin, Gianna Borrello, 3, of Bloomfield Hills (Borrello plays the tambourine for the show, but she's not a full member of the band). Julian's Band, along with Armstrong, recorded a CD of rock/funk covers (including Journey's "Lights") called *Recess*; it will be released in 2008.

Seprino says the pilot was "a somewhat experimental program serving as a sample piece, which opened up the possibilities of several show concepts that are now in development." Seprino's goal is to define a package of

programming projects under the "Julian's Band" brand that will include an educational series, Saturday morning cartoon, prime time weekly series and others. The spin-offs are at various stages of development, says Seprino, so "It's premature to make public any information regarding negotiation details or network placement."

But Seprino believes in Julian's great potential for success. "Being a musician myself, it's clear to me that he's a prodigy," Seprino says. "As Ralphe Armstrong first said, he is an old soul; he plays rhythms that are beyond the understanding of a 3-year-old. It's fascinating to watch. Then as if that weren't enough, he's just so darn cute."

Crain's Detroit Business editorial cartoonist Dan D'Addario designed a logo for the show of a cartoon Julian playing drums with his signature pacifier. The logo now also appears on a line of T-shirts, the Vic Firth drumsticks, stickers and other promotional materials.

Armstrong says Julian's exposure will inspire other children to get into music. "We forgot about culture and art educating the kids,"

Julian and his band performed at the Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Bloomfield Hills during Julian's book signing event. The 3-year-old, touted as "The World's Youngest Drummer," was recognized in the Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Remarkable Revealed 2007 edition. Photo by Justin Dennis



he says. "Give them a guitar; give them piano lessons. Get them started. It keeps kids off the streets."

Julian has also raised awareness in the music world that there's a lack of education and equipment for his age group. Peter Spellman, director of the career development center at Berklee College of Music in Boston, says he'd love to see a music education program for young gifted musicians like Julian introduced at Berklee. "He's one of those kids who really heard his mom's heartbeat and took it to heart," says Spellman of Julian. "It seems to be a return to home when he gets behind the drums. He's pretty amazing."

MARCHING TO HIS OWN BEAT

Though music is clearly Julian's gift, he has demonstrated all-around proficiency for his age. He attends pre-3s at University Liggett School, a private school in Grosse Pointe Woods. He also loves to ride his bike, play sports and practice martial arts. He trains in the advanced 5- to 10-year-old group under world-renowned Grand Master Willie Adams at the Southfield Martial Arts Institute and has already earned his white and yellow belts, and competed and won against 5-year-olds in club tournaments. "He's way above average," Adams says.

During the day, Julian hangs out with his grandma Gloria Tactac, who takes care of Julian and his sister

Annalisa, who will be 2 in January. Tactac says she never gets sick of hearing Julian playing the drums, no matter how loud or for how long. And that's a good thing, seeing that Annalisa has taken a liking to the keyboard, singing (mom Lisa has played the piano since she was 8 and also sings) *and* the drums.

Bernadino and Lisa say the quality time Julian spends with his grandmother is teaching him respect for women. And "Julian does laundry and he does dishes," says Lisa.

"He's being raised to be a true gentleman," says Bernadino, who is Julian's full-time manager. And Julian is learning to understand the meaning of bank transactions, reads his business e-mails and is involved with every business deal, says Bernadino. Whatever Julian earns is his: "That's our son's money, God bless him, whatever he wants to do with it," Bernadino says.

The money, however, is the least valuable gift the Pavones believe Julian can receive from playing music. Because of drums, Julian's eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills have far exceeded that of other children his age (drum teacher Badalament says the tot's eye-hand coordination on the drums is equivalent to at least a 10-year-old's).

Julian's latest undertaking, a product he invented and named "Abracadabra," is perfect proof of the doors music can open. Julian came up with the idea after

accidentally marking one of Bernadino's white T-shirts with a pen. He "fixed it" by painting Wite-Out over the stain. "He waved his hand and said 'Abracadabra,'" explains Bernadino. Julian realized he needed other colors to fix other things. "He actually mixed red food dye and Wite-Out to make pink, and applied that to a pink blouse," Bernadino says. They're now working on developing a formula in as many colors as possible. Julian designed the container to be a bass drum with drumstick applicator. Robert L. Kelly, of the metro Detroit law firm Dickinson Wright PLLC, filed a patent application in October for the invention, which is intended to cover up paint chips and stains on clothes. *Good Morning America* and *Inside Edition* both featured Julian and his invention live in early November.

The Pavones say they'll support Julian in whatever endeavors he chooses. "We want him to do what he wants to do," says Lisa. "If he says he doesn't want to play anymore, we hope it doesn't happen, but if it does, then OK."

"It's very important that he lives a balanced life and is a normal kid," says Bernadino. "He loves Baby Einstein as much as he loves The Beatles."

For now, they just feel blessed knowing Julian has accomplished, at 3, what many won't in a lifetime.

"Everything in our life that's happened has been because of him," says Bernadino. "He's a powerful force." ☐

Below, at left: Grandmother Gloria Tactac says she never tires of Julian's playing. Her son, Bernadino (Julian's dad), has been playing since second grade. Photo by Daniel Lippitt. At right: Julian's custom Vic Firth drumsticks are approximately as tall as his drum throne. Photo by Justin Dennis



If you can't get enough of Julian Pavone or want to follow this rising star, visit www.julianpavone.com.

