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OPPORTUNITY ROCKS

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While a snowstorm raged outside, teenage rockers paced onstage at the high school auditorium, running sound checks, tapping on microphones, strumming out Hendrix on guitars, asking for more vocals, more bass.

"Sibilance, check, sibilance," one boy intoned into a turned-off mike, then jumped into the air with his guitar.

It was all a prelude to a battle of the bands. Dozens of high school bands from the western suburbs had sent in demo CDs to enter last Saturday's contest at Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, but only 10 ranging from punk rockers to jazz musicians had made the cut.

The annual contest, known as Danny's Juice, is one of the few places in the area a prospective teenage rock star can get the respect he deserves. (Occasionally, there's a she, or even an all-girl band, but for the most part, it's a guy thing. Nobody seems to know why.) And for anyone who wants to get a taste of the music that youngsters are cranking out in their spare time and is willing to put up with minor hearing loss Danny's Juice is the place to be.

"Juicemaster Flex" Bill Cady, the event's gray-haired scion, conceived of the idea six years ago before it evolved into a polished, professionally judged benefit for Danny's Place, a foundation for local youths established in memory of Daniel McCarthy, who died in a car accident two years ago.

Clad in a leather vest, tie-dyed shirt, cowboy hat, and hemp-beaded necklace, the Juicemaster described how most teens, despite being accomplished rock musicians, don't have the resources, opportunities, or years behind them to gig outside of school talent shows, friends' birthday parties, and if they're lucky, an occasional bar mitzvah.

Most nightclubs don't allow anyone under 18 through their doors, let alone up on stage. Yet here, the bands are evaluated by a panel that includes professionals in the music business. The contestants also vie for such prizes as free recording studio time, new music equipment, and music lessons with the pros.

With snow still falling at 6 p.m., fans began to stream into the auditorium. By 7, the place was packed. Security guards, who by day are students' parents, manned every door. Entrance was barred without a hand-stamp or a white sticker badge labeled "Staff."

Even band members needed credentials; without them, there was no going backstage. Backstage, in this case, was a long, brightly lighted hallway with a slick tile floor behind the auditorium.

Band members piled their instruments against the walls and hung out, waiting to perform. Electric guitarists strummed strings that pinged softly without their amps, drummers hit anything and anyone that stood still, vocalists mouthed impassioned lyrics with their hands over their ears.

"I don't get nervous," said Acton-Boxborough senior Eoin Bohnert, the drummer for the punk/rock band, This Meuxn. Eoin's name is pronounced "Owen," and the band's name should be pronounced "This Moon," though, Bohnert explained, most people call them "This Mewn."

Backstage, waiting to play, Bohnert paced, his drumsticks in his pockets. "OK, I do get nervous, but not until right before I go on," he admitted. "I get sweaty palms and I think, 'Holy crap. I just forgot how to play the drums.'"

But once he and the band start playing, it's a smooth ride, he said. "It's like you were born to do this. There's nothing else."

Just before they walked on stage, Bohnert's mother, in the audience, couldn't sit still. "I get nervous for them every time," she said with a pronounced Irish brogue. "They've been practicing forever, but you want them to do well."

When This Meuxn emerged from the wings, Bohnert's mom shot out of her seat and let out a piercing finger whistle which Eoin later said he heard over the screaming crowd then sat down, tapping her foot against the floor. One of the staff members, upon seeing her, offered her a set of earplugs, but she smiled and shook her head.

Like This Meuxn, many of the bands played blaring punk and metal. But a few broke the mold. Acton-Boxborough junior Trevor Walker plays drums in a band called Marmalading, whose music he describes as "jazz-fusion-classical-new age-funk-rock."

Marmalading is a play on the word "jamming," explained Walker. "Don't worry," he said. "No one really gets it right off."

"I guess we're an instrumental band," said junior Lee Dietterich, Marmalading's clarinet player and pianist; he also plays classical music with Acton-Boxborough's concert band. "We do stuff that adults always like, and kids aren't always sure. You might hear a little Dave Brubeck, a little Chick Corea, a little Van Morrison, and a little classical piano mixed into our music. Sometimes it's not what kids expect."

But on Saturday night, Marmalading had the crowd on its side. Kids who had gathered for other punk bands in a "mosh pit" in front of the stage started to clap and sway, and even attempt some bumbling swing dancing when the band launched into its version of Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing."

A few kids in the pit decided to lift a small junior-high student above their heads for some crowd surfing, but it became a short-lived stunt when a Staff Security Mom emerged suddenly from the shadows.

"Judging these bands will be like comparing apples and hand grenades," said Danny's Juice judge Earl Pughe, after Marmalading left the stage. A certified instrument technician, guitar teacher, former Broadway pit orchestra man, and now an Acton resident, Pughe described the grueling task ahead. "It's very easy to mistake something that is louder for something that is better," he said, pulling out his earplugs.

"The sound system also has been getting fine-tuned over the course of the night," he added, "so we have to really look at whether an instrument player might have been weak, or the sound wasn't quite adjusted right."

But by the evening's end, clear winners had emerged, and judges chose six bands to take home prizes. First place exclusive use of Blue Light Studios in Concord for 24 hours went to a rock band called Emisis, whose saxophone player, Andrew Silvario, stood out like a diamond in the punk.

Marmalading came in second, a coup for an instrumental band at a rock concert, and third went to Tuesday Memo, a folk acoustic group, made up of a freshman drummer one of just two girl rockers in the competition and two juniors.

"There is nothing like being a teenage rock star," said Steven Paul Perry of Concord, the owner of Blue Light Studios and one of the evening's five judges. (Audiophiles, note: He is not the Steven Perry from Journey. Back in the '70s, this Perry was the vocalist and lead guitarist for his own high-school rock band, Wilderness, and later went on to play professionally with Rick Berlin and John Hiatt. "You get the rush of being onstage, you get recognition in the halls, and the jocks leave you alone," he said of his high school stardom.

This is the feeling he has strived for and found in every one of the seven bands he's played in since.

"In high school, you are king of what you love, and you get respect for it," Perry said. "It's a taste of what we're all chasing."

SIDEBAR:

Winning bands

1. Emisis

(Acton, Boxborough, Andrew Pentz, lead guitar and vocals; Andrew Silvario, rhythm guitar and saxophone; Evan Morse, drums; Kent McCann, bass guitar and trombone.

2. Marmalading

(Acton, Boxborough, Ben Taylor, bass; Jeff Shane, piano and flute; Lee Dietterich, clarinet and piano; Trevor Walker, drums.

3. Tuesday Memo

(Acton, Boxborough, Alex Schwartz, bass, vocals, guitar; Danno Cullinane, piano, vocals, and ukulele; Echo Bein, percussion; Matt Sirois, vocals, guitar, and ukulele.

4. Mind Work

(Westford, Evan Joyce, bass guitar; Dave Yim, drums; Katie Reiser, keyboard.

5. Twists, Slugs and Roscoes

(Needham, Dave Hoon, drums; Miles Cree, bass guitar; Tim Choegua, lead guitar.

6. 2 East

(Acton., Boxborough, Harvard, Andrew Pentz, lead guitar and vocals; David Meyers, vocals and percussion; Keith Simpson, bass; Matt Meyers, vocals

and keyboard; Will Deeks, rhythm guitar and vocals; Zach Camara, drums.

Got your own high school band story? Let us know at globenorthwest@globe.com.

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