

It's All About the Music

By Michelle
Drown



Paul Wellman

YOUTHFUL SOUNDS: Teens gather at the Santa Barbara Boys & Girls Club's MusicBox Studio to make some beautiful noise. From left: Alvaro Jaimes, Dalia Kahn, Jamey Geston, Jose Jimenez, New Noise program director Kris Ehrman, Casmali Lopez, Ella Garcia, and Chimaway Lopez

S.B.'s Notes for Notes is Broadcasting Its Tune Throughout the U.S.

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"You're gonna want to put in earplugs for this," the teens told me before two of them launched into a song of their own creation that featured crunchy guitar licks and hard-hitting drum patterns. It was infectious rock 'n' roll, and those of us listening bobbed our heads and tapped our feet to the driving beat. This musical excerpt was courtesy of Jose Jimenez and Casmali Lopez, but spontaneous performances are a common occurrence in this venue, a small studio within the Santa Barbara Boys & Girls Club on Canon Perdido Street.

The afternoon I visited, teens were exchanging musical ideas in the gigging area, singing karaoke in the engineering space, and laying down tracks in the recording studio. It was a typical afternoon in the three-room space that exists thanks to the nonprofit Notes for Notes.

Started in Santa Barbara eight years ago, Notes for Notes formed with the idea of giving kids free access to musical expression. "It was just the one little idea," explained CEO and cofounder Phil Gilley. "We started at the Teen Center [on Chapala and Victoria], and then the S.B. Bowl got involved."

The seed for Notes for Notes was Gilley's, but it was Rod Hare, who sits on the S.B. Bowl's educational outreach board, who helped grow the idea into a far-reaching nonprofit model. "Notes for Notes' [formation] is essentially a buddy movie," Gilley said of his partnership with Hare. "We consider each other cofounders in this because it really was just a roomful of gear and us hanging out before [Rod] stumbled upon us and got the Bowl involved. He saw the national implications of how we could spread."

What started as a "roomful of gear" in 2007 has grown exponentially with no evidence of slowing down. Early on, the decision was made to take MusicBox Studios on the road, so to speak. "We thought we can just creep down the coast, or we can plant our flag and establish ourselves nationally," Gilley explained. "So that's when I moved to Nashville and launched these two out here." With its presence secured in the U.S.'s country-music capital, Gilley and Hare set their sights on expansion in California. "Now we are actually creeping down the coast to Ventura," he said. "We opened in Santa Monica last year; West San Gabriel opens in about six weeks. I think Ventura will open in the beginning of 2015. And then San Francisco in January. ... We have five clubs now, and by the end of next year we'll have at least 12," said Gilley. New sites include Detroit, Brooklyn, Austin, and Atlanta, thanks in part to a generous recent partnership with the Country Music Association, whose assistance will help set up the next five MusicBox locations.

Humble Beginnings

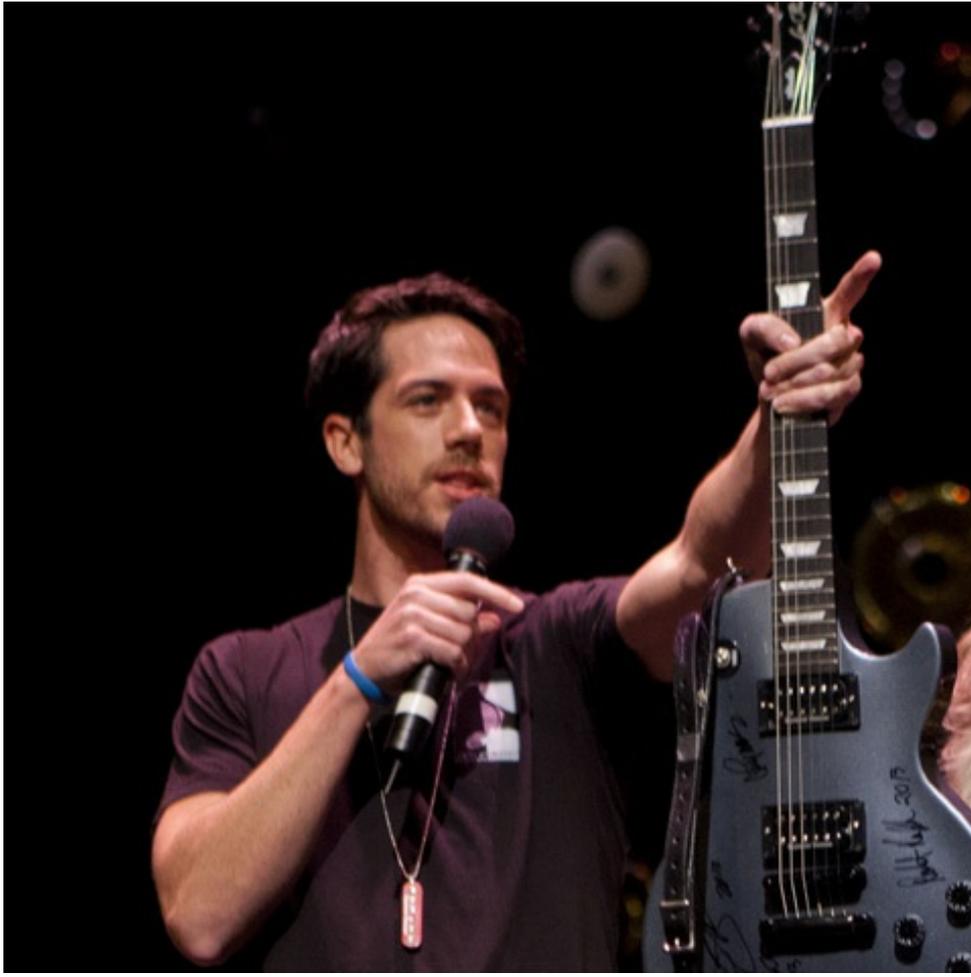
It's easy to understand why Notes for Notes is achieving such success. For the past decade, public education arts programs have been squeezed out due to budget cuts, the tragic result being that many kids do not get introduced to music and the magical outlet of expression it offers. Notes for Notes remedies that with the space and gear for kids to explore their creative curiosity — for free.

"There are no fees, so there's no competition in our eyes," said Gilley. "A member does not represent a dollar. ... So there is no need for scholarships for those who can't pay, which would otherwise create a one-up, one-down dynamic, and young people are really sensitive to that. The moment they feel like they're one place and another youth is in another, it makes it really hard to start a conversation."

Another critical aspect of the formula is building relationships; each MusicBox location has a director who imparts their knowledge, dedicates their time, and sets the tone of the space. "It's really the program director who is in the studio every hour, who makes those facilities what they are," Gilley explained. "At our core, we're a relationship organization, and music is the conduit. ... It is the starting point either to a relationship that is built on learning music together, creating music together, learning something about someone else, and, most importantly, learning something about yourself."

In addition to careful staffing, Gilley and his team have caught the eyes and ears of a number of established musicians. Here at home, Jack Johnson and Glen Phillips have both popped by the Notes for Notes studios to play a few songs, jam with the kids, and answer questions. (Both Johnson and Phillips are on the nonprofit's advisory board, which includes other luminaries such as Jeff Bridges, Joe Bonamassa, Slash, David Crosby, Martin Gore, and Seymour Duncan).

In its latest incarnation, Notes for Notes has kids getting to record — in absentia — with well-known bands. Gilley explained, "It's still in the works, but we've been working closely with the band Capital Cities. We did a project this past summer at Bonnaroo, where we actually brought a mobile recording studio down to the festival. We had produced half a dozen songs in the [MusicBox] studios, which featured the kids, then we went on-site and started reaching out to artists to come in and lay something down on these tracks. Our goal over time is to actually sell a track, with all the proceeds being split between Notes for Notes and a scholarship fund for the kids on that track."



By Courtesy Photo

Philip Gilley

The Music is Me

Back in the Box, unaware of the details of the project, a group of teens obligingly play every request I throw at them. Carpinteria-based Jamey Geston busts out a great rendition of “Fever” with budding singer Ella Garcia joining in on harmonies. Dalia Khan, who started coming to the MusicBox when she was 14 and now goes to UCSB and is part-time director of the studio, delivered a soulful version of Gnarlz Barkley’s “Crazy” accompanied by Chimaway Lopez on guitar.

All the while, Eastside Notes for Notes program director Kris Ehrman watches over his young charges with benevolent calm. He brings a cordless mike to Garcia (“It’s like my birthday,” she squeals in response to the new equipment) and unobtrusively puts instruments back in their rightful place. Ehrman is part of the “lifeblood,” as Gilley calls the directors, of the Eastside studio. “There’s a vibe, and it’s almost not qualitative,” he said of the environment the directors create. “How do you describe the vibe other than it just feels like it should? It’s a place where you can go and be yourself. That feeling is nothing you can put in a program book and then pass off; it’s about finding the right person for the studio, our program, and, most importantly, our vibe and culture.”

And it is that culture that keeps the kids coming back, like Kahn and Jimenez, who graduated from Santa Barbara High last June and now works at Just Play Music record store. “I started coming about a month ago,” Geston said, “and I’ve already made a new friend,” speaking of Garcia, whom she met two days prior. It’s an environment that is alive and dynamic and full of possibility. “The studios present the opportunity to educate on more than just performance and learning an instrument; it [introduces kids to] tons of different careers all the way up to and beyond

engineering and production,” Gilley said. “It’s something we’re all proud of, and because [we work as a] team, we all get to look at it and know we put our hands on it in some way.”

While Notes for Notes is something for those involved to be proud of, for sure, it’s more than that for the cofounders. “For [Hare], it’s a labor of love, and for me, it’s my career and my passion and hopefully our legacy,” said Gilley.

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Notes for Notes hosts its annual fundraiser featuring Joe Bonamassa, Jimmy Vivino of the Basic Cable Band, and special guests on Friday, October 24, 7 p.m., at the Lobero Theatre (33 W. Canon Perdido St.), with a VIP pre-party at 5:30 p.m. For tickets and information, call (805) 966-4946 or visit lobero.com.

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