



THE PLAIN DEALER

Drumming up young talent

Euclid teen chosen to play in jazz concerts for Grammys

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Even the old-timers can't believe their ears when the kid drummer breaks into a solo.

"Wow." "Unbelievable." "A boulder rolling down a hill," they say.

At age 15, Steve Renko of Euclid is rattling the music world with chops and ideas way beyond the ability of most musical teenagers.

He has known limelight and applause since age 9, playing in local clubs and national drum competitions when he was barely able to see over the tops of his tom-toms.

At age 12, he became the youngest drummer in the history of Cuyahoga Community College's High School All Stars band.

At 13, he brought down the house in Chicago's Hard Rock Café, beating 11 adult drummers to win a regional drum-off.

Next week, Steve, a freshman at St. Ignatius High School, plays Hollywood in a series of big-band jazz concerts for the annual Grammy Awards.

"He's a true example of prodigy," says world-class jazz pianist Joe Hunter of Cleveland Heights. "It makes you wonder how someone so young could play at such a mature level."

Hunter and local jazz bassist Dallas Coffey played with Steve on a taped audition for the Grammy Foundation.

In a nationwide competition, he was the only drummer selected for an elite 18-piece high school jazz band.

The ensemble will play with five-time Grammy winner vocalist Al Jarreau and four-time Grammy nominee saxophonist Dave Koz.

"I'm not nervous," said Steve. "It's more like excitement."

Steve first picked up a set of sticks when he was a toddler, banging on his father's drum set.

"I taught him how to hold the sticks," said Mitch Renko, 53, drummer for the local rock band The Crowd Pleasers. "By the time he was 4, he had his own drum set. By 12, his

technique was terrifying, and that's when I handed over the reins to him."

At 9 years, Steve began studying with nationally renowned drummer Bob McKee, who had been Mitch Renko's teacher back in the late 1960s.

McKee, 77, of Parma, has taught generations of great drummers, including Ray Porrello, who had been in Sammy Davis Jr.'s band; Tom Dobeck of the Michael Stanley Band; David Beal, who accompanied Joe Cocker; and Jamey Haddad, who plays with Paul Simon

But Steve Renko, he says, is the most advanced for his age. "When I first heard him play, I said, Oh, yeah, this has got to go somewhere," said McKee. "He's exceptional and he learns quickly."

On a recent day, the master and student, preparing for the Hollywood gig, were working out in McKee's basement, playing along to a recording of a complex Buddy Rich big-band arrangement.

Every muscle, every brain wave, every bone in the young drummer's body was locked into Rich's frenzied syncopation, which only an expert could handle.

In a blur of perfect motion, the kid was right there with Rich sticks, fingers, wrists moving from symbol to tom to snare but Rich blew into a solo and the kid stumbled.

"You lost your count," said McKee.

"I don't like playing that solo," said Steve.

"You don't have to play that solo," countered McKee. "Play your own solo. Put your own thing in there. Just don't lose your count."

After the workout, Steve took a moment to reflect on his soaring career in the highly competitive music world.

He downplayed all the talk of "prodigy" and "the next Buddy Rich."

"I've worked really hard," he said. "But I'm also pretty lucky to be able to play with all the people I play with."

Last year, Steve became the drummer for Ernie Krivda's Fat Tuesday Big Band, a local swing orchestra featuring top players in Northeast Ohio, including pianist Hunter.

"The boy's 14 and he's able to drive the bus," says Hunter. "The joke in the band is he's getting better with every chorus. It's like watching a boulder rolling down a hill."

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