

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland offers inner-city preschoolers a unique way to prepare for reading

Hall uses music to educate kids

By Joe Milicia
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CLEVELAND — Little voices fill the unusually quiet Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on a rare sunny winter morning.

The 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds flock into the hall's cavernous main floor, where cars from U2's Zoo TV tour and Phish's giant hot dog dangle high overhead.

These children don't know Little Richard from Bo Diddley — not yet.

The house that rock built devotes a lot of attention to honoring the Beatles, the Doors and other legendary artists. Its Toddler Rock program helps fulfill an educational mission that, like a steady bass line, is felt but often goes unnoticed.

The award-winning program, which started in 1999, gives inner-city children lessons in music and literacy in an environment that they otherwise wouldn't experience.

Ruthie Brown, the program's creator, knew it was working when she heard about a child who said, "That's my Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" one day while passing the building.

Building self-esteem

"They felt a part of it," Brown said. "That's one of the first requirements for self-esteem."

The 160 pre-schoolers spill out of their buses and have

the building all to themselves before it opens to the public. They split into groups, and one gaggle makes its way to the rock architects room, where guitars once played by John Fogerty and Slash hang on the wall. The children sit cross-legged in a circle, some fidgeting with ID badges around their necks.

They're oblivious of the nearby urn containing the ashes of disc jockey Alan Freed, who first used the term rock 'n' roll. The children happily sing a song with music therapist Deforia Lane, learning to say hello in different languages.

Then Lane pulls out a photo of Billy Joel and the kids shout out his name like he's Barney or SpongeBob. Joel was part of the week's lesson when they were learning about the letter "J."

"He plays the ... *piano!* and he likes to ... *sing!*" the children shout, finishing Lane's sentences.

Lane, who developed the program, has a simple explanation for why tots and rock mix.

"Music is like popcorn. You can't eat just one," said Lane, who is director of music therapy at University Hospitals Case Medical Center.

"It's one of those inherent, rhythmic, melodic touchstones in our lives that we can't avoid."

The letter 'K'

Her group has moved on to the letter "K" this morning, and the children are introduced to the music of B.B. King. Lane sings, "I love the letter K. It sounds like Ka, Ka, Ka."

"A child will sing A-B-C-D-E-F-G long before they learn to recite the alphabet," she said. "If we can use that concept of rhythm and melody in learning other skills, that's what we try to do as music therapists to instill some of the pre-literacy skills that we're working on."

Two floors up, children are gathered around music therapist Ed Gallagher in a room currently dedicated to a "Help!" Beatles exhibit.

Gallagher plays a recording of Wilbert Harrison's "Kansas City."

The kids click blue and red sticks in time to the beat as Harrison sings, "I'm going to Kansas City. Kansas City here I come."

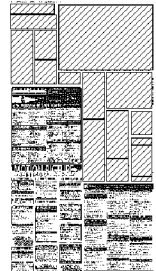
Then Gallagher starts strumming his acoustic guitar and the children jump up and down in a blur of frenzied motion to Chubby Checker's "Twist."

Four-year-old Le'Ana Christian says Gallagher's guitar playing was cool and describes what she likes best about Toddler Rock.

"I like to do letters," she says softly.

Letter recognition, rhyming and alliteration — all crucial to developing reading skills — are important parts of the three 10-week programs, which wrap up for the season May 29. So are the development of social skills and self-esteem.

"Once they feel they belong, it makes learning much easier. They have no idea they're getting literacy or music theory," said Brown, the Rock Hall's director of community programs. "It's all the parts coming together to make one healthy whole."



No living on the edge

Toddler Rock is careful to stay away from rock 'n' roll's edgier side. The music therapists are unlikely to show photos of Gene Simmons or belt out a KISS tune any time soon.

"There are certain parts we avoid, but there's so much more that we can look to and emphasize that we don't have any trouble using the genre itself for the children," Lane said.

In 2006, Toddler Rock was named a Coming Up Taller

semifinalist by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, which recognizes after-school programs, especially those for underserved children.

Many of the children attending Toddler Rock live in housing projects, and Brown hears stories of the violence some have seen. She hopes they're inspired by the hour they spend each week at the Rock Hall.

"We can give them a frame of reference for something better," Brown said.

"They have witnessed much more than any 3-year-old should."

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— Deforia Lane, University Hospitals Case Medical Center



AP photos by Tony Dejak

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's award-winning Toddler Rock program teaches letter recognition, rhyming and alliteration.



Christian, 4, dances as an instructor plays "The Twist." The classes also help develop social skills and self-esteem.