[MINOR THREATS]

TINY MASTERS OF

School of Rock goes electro at Bancroft Elementary School, where the Modern Music Makers lay down their own beats. Christopher Paré learns why kids are the future of music, and how some people don't like it one bit

TOMORROW

Menudo 2.0: Disco Dragons

The kids are alright: MEE Rockstars

At the end of *Hearts of Darkness*, the 1991 behind-the-scenes documentary companion to *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola stares into his wife's Super-8 camera and predicts that one day, "Some fat girl in Ohio is going to be the new Mozart."

Talented as he was, in 18th-century Vienna Mozart only had certain means of making music at his disposal. But what if he had had access to the tools of today—what would Wolfgang have done with a sampler? Or a drum machine? Or software for recording and mixing multi-track compositions? Then there's the accessibility factor: what if these tools had been cheap, plentiful and available to everyone?

"Anybody—anybody—who has a computer and can use Garage Band... can take any recorded sound and turn it into music," says Columbia University professor Dave Soldier, who piloted a music project for kids at the Amber Charter School in New York City's East Harlem. "The odd thing about that is how it doesn't even seem weird anymore. But six years ago you couldn't do that. It's changing so fast that we don't even realize it."

In Richard Linklater's *School of Rock*—and the subsequent unrelated documentary *Rock School*—kids discover their inner Sid Vicious or Freddie Mercury. But why stop there? As David Shaw and Bianca Brandt-Rousseau discovered, kids can do more than just play music—they can produce it. Eat your heart off a plastic lunch tray, Amadeus.

KIDS'N'PLAY

Shaw, a graphic designer and DJ [and occasional *Naked Eye* staff member – Ed.] hailing from Thunder Bay, had just left his day job when the idea for Modern Music Makers presented itself. "It was something in the back of my mind when I quit," he tells me. "I was doing the same thing day after day, and not feeling as if I was using my creative energy for anything good."

Around the same time, a friend at Bancroft Elementary School in Montreal, Quebec, had started an after-school program for kids and was looking for ideas. Shaw remembered Dave Soldier and his school project, called Da Hiphop Raskalz. "I look at this guy, who's volunteering and doing what I think looks like the most wonderful thing you could possibly do. Here's how people are spending their time—where are my hours going? It's ridiculous."

And so Modern Music Makers was born. With Brandt-Rousseau, Shaw modelled his version closely on Soldier's Raskalz: students (five to ten years old) are divided into groups of four (give or take), and given the means to make their own songs from scratch. Explains Shaw: "Each group got a drum kit with a certain number of sounds on it—bass, melodies and some effects—and they each had a different palate of sounds to work with."

The means and materials at their disposal were limited at best, but that's the beauty of the program: anyone can conceivably scrape together the minimum kit to pull it off. For Modern Music Makers, this

consisted of a malfunctioning point-and-shoot DV cam, some primitive green screen effects, a small laptop, a microphone, a soundcard, a midi keyboard, and an instrument from each kid's bedroom. The real constraint, says Shaw, was time. "We had one hour a week to work with four groups of kids. The maximum [time] each one would get with the technology was 15 minutes. That's not a lot of time to generate ideas. Luckily, the programs we used are good for doing stuff on the fly."

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SOUND + VISION

Dave Soldier's formula is no secret. On his website, davesoldier.com, he describes his methodology, offers tips on making the best use of time, and lists what equipment he uses in the process. Says Shaw, "We looked at it as a good template to begin with, and went along with what technology we had available and were comfortable with."

For his contribution, Shaw—a self-taught video editor—saw an opportunity to connect the dots, and introduced a multimedia component to Soldier's original idea: music videos. "Being able to put that technology in the kids' hands and have them work with it and realize they could create a video, create a song—you could see that disconnect being broken down."

Each band—The Disco Dragons, Pop Princesses and M.E.E. Rock Stars—set to work in search of a sound. Shaw and Brandt-Rousseau recorded tons of tracks, and then in post-production peeled back the layers that didn't work. "What we're really proud of is that the songs themselves are constructed out of all different elements," says Shaw, beaming. "It's all things that the kids chose, and it's pretty amazing to understand that pretty much everything you're hearing is 100 percent from the kids' brains."

The experience was a total revelation, both for the students and their teachers. Shaw recalls the youngest Pop Princess as she listened back to her first session. "You could see it happening. You could see her open right up, and she's like, 'I didn't know it was that easy to make a song! This sounds WAY better than Gwen Stefani!'"

Another girl loved it so much they could hardly get her to leave. "'Why can't school be like this all day!?' she'd say. Her mom would be waiting downstairs for her and she'd shout, 'I don't care! I'm sleeping here!'"

Most of the kids dove right in (though the grade six girls weren't down), rehearsing dance moves, filming their videos, and writing songs about sunshine and spaceships. "What was great was that by the end, every single kid in the class had found their niche. Even the shy kids eventually broke out of their shells and did something they liked, whether it was programming drums, choreographing, whatever," Shaw says.

The Disco Dragons, in particular, outdid themselves. The band, made up of boys from grades two to four, produced a mind-boggling four tracks (one for each member), and all from different genres. There's Pedro, 10, who just wanted to write romantic slow jams about being in love and going to a dance and holding a girl's hand. Then there's "the hip hop kid, Shams, who wants to make lots of money," laughs Brandt-Rousseau. "Then you have Nigel, who's more into science fiction."

"He rapped about UFOs invading the earth," explains Shaw. "'Are they going to be good, or evil and destroy the world?' Regardless, he's scared.

"The youngest one, Ty, eight, is very political and serious. His song 'Playing Tag' is catchy, complex, and can be read on many levels. I remember stepping back and being like, 'Yeah, that's about your whole world when you're in grade two...' That's what you care about—playing tag! Are you going to get caught? Are you good at playing tag? That is what it sums up to. But then I look on the other side of the paper and there's another song that he didn't even show us called 'Stop the Fight.' It's about how religion needs to be separated from politics, and how greed is spreading around the world, and that wealth should be redistributed. And there I am thinking, 'Well, maybe you don't just think about playing tag.'"

Three other schools have since expressed interest in the program, but Brandt-Rousseau plays down their hand in its success. "We were more like enablers. Dave [Shaw] and I gave them the tools to do it on their own. We were just there."

RASKALZ REPREZENT!

Dave Soldier is talking about his latest experiment in sound, a project using EEG which looks at how brainwaves can run music. He's a big supporter of Modern Music Makers, and thinks kids make better music than most of the crap on TV or radio.

Growing up in Carbondale, Illinois, Soldier played classical viola (and piano and guitar) and listened mostly to country and blues. At 16 he discovered salsa legend Eddie Palmieri and decided then and there to become a composer. He played in a band with Bo Diddley, then in 1981 relocated to New York City where he played in more bands and got his PhD in neuroscience. Today he's a professor in the Neurology, Psychiatry

T-shirt sales – the sweetest plum

and Neuroscience departments at Columbia University. He kept making music the whole time, and even got a gig as John Cale's music director, doing arrangements and essentially running the band for six years (this was on top of his day job). "I spend most of my time doing the science, but then I can go home and compose and practice, do projects like coaching the kids... and all these different things."

Soldier has released 20 CDs, appeared on 50 others, and believes genuine music can be created by artists who don't know what they're doing. In 1999 he collaborated with elementary students in Brooklyn on a free-jazz project called the Tangerine Awkestra (prompting a broad spectrum of online feedback from, "This is pure genius" to, "It feels like a joke with no punchline"). The next year he formed the Thai Elephant Orchestra and taught pachyderms to improvise on the harmonica and *renat*, a Southeast Asian variation on the xylophone (he's also designed special instruments for finches and chimpanzees). Back in New York, Soldier agreed to volunteer to teach music at the Amber Charter School in East Harlem, where there's a huge Puerto Rican community, in what became the Hiphop Raskalz project.

"I brought instruments for bachata and salsa, styles that you hear on the street in the neighbourhood," says Soldier on his website. "But virtually all the kids told me they liked hip hop the most." He returned, this time armed with synthesizers and a drum machine. "I first teach the kids to program a drum machine, and then record their keyboard parts, improvised vocals, and easy-to-play instruments, like slide whistles."

LISTEN TO THE CHILDREN ON THE RADIO

On their 2006 self-titled CD, Da Hiphop Raskalz prove two things: kids can write great songs, and this poses a legitimate threat to the music industry. "People hear hip hop all the time, but when do they hear hip hop by kids? Then they get really excited."

Try listening to Sweetness (Dorchell Haqq, Daichell Griffin, Ryan Summers and Naya Motta, all eight years old) without falling in love with rap all over again:

"I'm chocolate Hershey, with peanuts and caramel / I'm bubblegum, with all the sweetness and juiciness / I'm Tootsie Roll, with all the chocolate and sweetness / We all kinds of candy, don't be ashamed / We all kinds of candy, we Sweetness and Vain." (From "Do the Lollipop.")

Some people love what Da Hiphop Raskalz do, others call it a joke. Soldier doesn't let any online negativity over his beliefs faze him. "If you do anything unusual, you open yourself up to criticism. That's just how it is. I'm making this music because I think it ought to be there, and I wanna hear what kids do with music. It's fresh to me and I enjoy it. These kids wanted to do hip hop."

His only concern—and a thorny one at that—is the danger that computers and drum machines are a substitute for learning real instruments. "I'm not saying it's easy to make good music this way. It's always going to be hard to make good music, but it's as if hundreds of years of change have been compressed into the last several years."

Without technology, it would be unlikely that the Modern Music Makers and Da Hiphop Raskalz would even exist. "What are you going to do, bring in a live drummer, and then tell the five-year-old kids how to tell the drummer to play? Maybe once or twice, but not every day. Now you can."

Coppola's fat girl from Ohio doesn't seem so alone anymore. "I hope this becomes a movement for kids to become composers. They might start off with hip hop or whatever kind of music they like, but it will become broader, there will be more variety, they'll learn more and they'll make good music." ■

Zac Efron aint got nothing on this kid: Pedro of the Disco Dragons