

WHAT MAKES A PRODIGY?

Talent, community credited for helping Shreveport-Bossier's wunderkinds succeed

By John Andrew Prime

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Mozart first made his mark on the world of music at age 3, setting a hard-to-match benchmark for prodigies ever since.

Not that there haven't been music and arts wunderkinds since, with a fair number coming from Shreveport.

From pianist Van Cliburn in the 1950s to folks today, a crop of Shreveport-Bossier City performers continues to fill stages they first graced when their age was measured in single digits.

Names mentioned by many in a recent social media inquiry ranged from cellist John-Henry Crawford and guitarists Matthew Davidson and Kenny Wayne Shepherd to singers Nia Savoy and Hurricane Chris and illustrator-moviemaker William Joyce.

"People have called me (a prodigy) before, but I don't personally consider myself one," said Crawford, 22, and the youngest of four brothers who all were encouraged to play a bowed instrument.

"When you hear the word 'prodigy,' you think of someone like Mozart or Midori Goto, someone who at age 7 or 8 was playing as well as someone in their 20s."

But, Crawford said, Mozart grew up in a household where at least one older sibling performed, and he had a father who practiced with him to an almost unbelievable degree.

"There's a common notion that Mozart was just born being able to play the piano, and with not very much practice was able to do it well, and had a knack for it," he said. "But that's not true. Mozart spent 3,000 hours with his dad practicing and composing before the age of 10. That's three hours a day for several years. That's staggering."

He speculated if you took a child from a completely different background in the household of Leopold Mozart, "my guess is you might not have exactly the same outcome, but something similar." Crawford's mother, noted local violinist and Centenary Suzuki School founder Laura Crawford, has thought long and hard on what brought out the hidden musical talents of her youngest son, as well as talented students she has encountered over the years.

"Some say there is no such thing as a prodigy, only one who was exposed early to a skill, worked hard with the 'deep practice' concept and had the right master coach," she said.

"My student, Eric Bates, whom I taught from age 6 to 18, won a coveted spot at age 23 with Cincinnati Symphony, winning over 175 other candidates. His parents drove to Centenary Suzuki School from Ringgold twice a week ... but it is interesting he also heard music from birth, since his mother taught piano lessons every day in the home."

Davidson, who has been performing professionally since 2010, got his first guitar at age 3, started taking lessons on an acoustic guitar in the second grade and won his first electric guitar in the 2007 James Burton Foundation's Guitar Showdown.

Two years later he was the youngest of eight guitarists chosen to play with Kenny Wayne Shepherd at the 2009 ARTBREAK. He joined the Shreveport chapter of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 116, at age 12.

"I don't know when I had that 'light bulb' moment," said Davidson, who also steps away from calling himself a prodigy. He said at some point he just noticed he seemed to be improving and enjoying the music and the moment more.

"I had a lot of fun doing that Kenny Wayne Shepherd show and fell in love with it, being in front of a big crowd," he said. "I thought 'I might like to give this a try.'" He credits the support of his mother, his father, his friends and others with making what success he has had to date possible.

"It helps to have a great support system," he said. "Parents, friends and peers or adults friends in music. That's a huge part of the motivation."

Davidson also has been lucky enough to have boosters in the community who include rock music great Joe Osborn.

"That kid is growing daily as a musician," says Osborn, who has performed as part of the famed Los Angeles rhythm section The Wrecking Crew, has appeared on literally hundreds of Top 10 tunes. His nimble bass work has graced songs ranging from Simon and Garfunkel's "The Boxer" to the Fifth Dimension's "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In." "He's not just a kid playing a guitar, he's a musician," Osborn said. "I've played with him a lot, in the studio and live, and I know what it feels like to play in a studio with somebody that 'feels it.' With him, it's like playing with a seasoned veteran."

Nia Savoy, like Davidson still at Caddo Magnet High School, credits support for bringing out talent and also shies away from calling herself a prodigy. But she also received social media mentions for beyond-her-years work on local stages, acting and singing. Now 17, she first performed when she was 3. She plans to attend Howard University in Washington and major in musical theater.

She credits her motivation as "the people who enjoy hearing me perform." That translates to community, she said. "Shreveport is full of the arts and is a great place to start and become nurtured," she said. "We have a plethora of theater companies here, amazing musicians, amazing teachers and vocalists here. It's a great place to be nurtured and hone in on your craft."

Shreveport and Bossier City "are a community that really has a deep interest in the arts, of all different kinds," says Kermit Poling, noted local violinist and public radio broadcaster.

"The environment, the arts community, provide opportunities for those who are interested even from a very young age. Beyond that, it involves a certain amount of good fortune," Poling said "to some extent there's an innate talent hiding in just about everyone, but the right doors and pathways have to open. The people we think of as prodigies, it's not just that they've learned to play well, they have this spark, this window that has opened up a passion for what they are doing. You have

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COURTESY ELLA DAVIDSON

Matthew Davidson and Nia Savoy together during a recent performance.



John-Henry Crawford performing with the Shreveport Symphony Orchestra in late January.

COURTESY/JENNIFER ROBISON



Matthew Davidson in 2009.

DOUG COLLIER/THE TIMES

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Prodigy

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to have an amazing technical ability in whatever you're doing, and there's the passion.

"The two ignite, and then you wind up with a talent that is extraordinary."

This involves public support, he said, and "clearly we have a history of people in the community who take an interest, who are willing to give support, and recognize that someone had talent and encourage them." One such individual was Arkla gas retiree Emmett Rhodes, who for many years orchestrated the Caroline Dormon Art Shows at the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum and who used his own funds to reward, even with tiny stipends, gifted young artists from the community.

And he made sure they got attention, too, bringing laboriously hand-written lists of winners to radio and television stations and the newspaper, listing both the top winners and the smaller division placements.

One of the artists who won an award and was encouraged was William Joyce, who got one of his first public displays through Rhodes in the mid-1970s and noted this after Rhodes' death in January 1992.

"He was generous and enjoyed the arts and the young people involved," said Joyce, who went on to create almost an empire based on art and imagination, including Moonbot Studios and the Oscar-winning animated short "The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore."

"He always kept up with what I was doing."

Joyce recalls being a little longer in the tooth than the norm when he first started attracting attention at such shows.

"I was 16 or 17," he recalled in an email response to a Times query. "They said I was something of a prodigy or maybe an 'enfant terrible.'"

He said he doesn't doubt there are others following hard on his footsteps.

"There always are," he said. "They just need support and luck. I was lucky to live here. People here supported my work since I was a kid."