

In the Spotlight.....

ANNA BERNSTEIN

By Andrew Kehe

How many 11-year-olds do you know who count “rudiments” among their absolute favorite activities?

How many 11-year-olds do you know who have their college double major mapped out already?

How many 11-year-olds do you know who are performing once, sometimes twice a week with some of the best blues musicians in Central Pa., all while rockin’ the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar style glasses?

This is how Thursday night blues jam drummer Anna Bernstein rolls.

And, uh, what were you doing at 11 again?

“Probably playing with my Tonka trucks in the sand box,” said drummer George Carver, one of many regulars at the jam at Champions who marvel at how well Anna plays, given her age, circumstance and atmosphere in which she’s immersed herself.

“She just keeps better and better every week.”

Nobody else playing at the jam on the second Thursday in September, or at any other jam for that matter, had a math test to take the next day. And if they did, they’d be sweating it, because you know, they took math 55 years ago.

Not Anna, a very confident sixth grader. She expected to ace it, just as she expects to conquer the music industry as a session drummer and producer, just as she expects to earn Penn State degrees with highest honors in music tech and percussion, just as she expects to dominate the slopes on her snowboard, a diversion from music she allows herself.

And, just as she expects to be up on stage at Champions come January or February playing the drums in one set and bass guitar in another. Bass lessons are advancing her toward that goal.

But until then, she relentlessly practices the drums at home in Hampton Township, and the essential drum roll patterns known as “rudiments,” in anticipation for Thursday nights, when she knows she’ll be under scrutiny from musicians she highly respects.

“I have loved it so far,” said Anna, who’s been playing regularly at the jam since January, but only started lessons last year. “I always appreciate all the great musicians who play here and who I get to play with.”

“I think I’m doing pretty good for my age.”

Her proud dad Rich, who accompanies Anna to the Jam, prefers to jettison the age caveat.

“I’m the one who brags,” he says. “She’s the humble one.”

“But I am proud of her. I’m most proud of her for her dedication to the fundamentals. She’ll practice her rudiments for an hour and a half before she even plays any song.”

“I love rudiments,” Anna interrupts, sprouting a broad smile.

“And I’m proud she has the guts to get up on stage,” Rich continues. “I never could have.”

Anna has expanded her exposure beyond the jam. She has her own YouTube page and has joined the “Acoustic Moose” duo of Linda Null and Tim Geisweit to form, yes. . . . “Acoustic Moose and Squirrel.”

She is, at age 11, pulling a rabbit out of her hat.

To complicate matters, Anna, who is left-handed, has had to adjust to playing a drum kit set up for right handed players. But she’s adapted – she doesn’t cross her right arm over left to strike the high-hat, for instance - and won’t let the awkwardness hold her back.

“You get used to it,” she said. “It’s not as hard as it would be for a right-handed guitar player to have to play a left-handed guitar.”

At the encouragement of Anna’s teacher Jeremy Hummel, a founding member of Breaking Benjamin, Anna and her dad first checked out the jam in early January.

“I think Buster (Grubb) asked me, ‘Do you play?’ I said, ‘No, I play the stereo. But my daughter plays the drums.”

The very next week, she was up on stage providing the back beat.

“I’ve seen great improvement compared to the first time I played with her (in January),” said Greg Hoover, who led a recent set with Anna on the drums, during which he called for several abrupt halts, which can be tricky for drummers. She nailed them all.

“She’s played through some growing pains pretty darn well. I think everybody’s been extremely accepting of her.”

Anna could be contributing at the jam for a long, long time. She’s a believer that blues is the prerequisite to other musical genres, but eventually jazz and funk or any style that enables her to play as a session musician will dominate her attention.

“I really like playing the blues, but I want to be as versatile as possible,” she says, in a very untypical 11-year-old manner. “If you’re gonna be a session drummer, you gotta know everything.”