

A&E

A R T S



The arts with
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E N T E R T A I N M E N T

There is no doubt in the minds of at least three students in the R&B program at Vic High that they want careers in the music business.

"Oh, definitely. Me and Amy used to sing in my room into hair brushes when we were kids, ever since then I've wanted to be a singer," gushes Carli Vierke, standing by her friend Amy Arsenault during a short break their teacher Eric Emde has allowed during practice.

The atmosphere in the band room of the school is charged, although the bell rang more than an hour ago. There are singers listening attentively, waiting for their turn at the mic, and many other students who appear to be in the room, purely for the entertainment value of being there.

"This is obviously a very good program. It helps us prepare for future endeavours in the music industry. It gives us the opportunity to perform with The Midnights and gives us exposure to many other musicians," says Arsenault, before Vierke excitedly jumps in.

"About that, exposure to other musicians, we got to perform at the Ingy with Jim Burns and it was sold out."

The two are as deadly serious as two 17-year-old Grade 12 girls can be about their art. And once they have the mic in hand they transform into singing sensations, bringing the house down with a hip twisting rendition of "Hold On", and "House that Jack Built", without missing a beat.

Well, the group may have missed one beat, "that's why we practice before we are on stage," admonishes Emde as he shuts the music down with a wave of his hand and cues in the drummer to pick up the beat.

Emde founded the Vic High R&B program in 1992 to replace the stage band which had been the educational standard for more than 25 years. At the time he was looking to create a course that would prepare students for job readiness. As more and more students were getting involved, with serious dedication backing their efforts, Emde decided to create a professional version of the group. By combining professional players with his up-and-coming talent, he formed the group The Midnights.

"I never expected it to take off like it did. We play the kind of music we always wanted, and people just love it," Emde says. Certainly his students do.

"Working with the pro musicians is challenging. They are obviously a lot more knowledgeable than we are so it is always a learning experience," says Arsenault. "Every gig we get so much better."

Paul Wainwright plays saxophone for a few bands around Victoria and he has been doing so for the past 25 years. He finds playing with The Midnights no less professional, if a little more rewarding than his other bands.

"It gives the kids first-hand experience working with somebody who plays music for a living. I couldn't have imagined how much excitement and inspiration I would get from working with the kids," he says.

Wainwright says for an 11-piece band like The Midnights there are only a certain number of gigs available, which is why the group feels so fortunate to have found a gracious host at Sopranos.

"The best thing for any group is to play one or more gigs a week at the same venue. It really brings a group together," he says. "I guess you might notice the students because the girls who sing at the front are younger. But the trombone blends right in and we had one drummer sit in last week and it was seamless, you would never know the difference."

Johann McBee is the trombone player that has stepped up to the plate for The Midnights. His favourite music to play is funk, and after he graduates from Vic High this year he plans to work towards being a full-time musician. From The Midnights he's learning stage presence and showmanship that might otherwise be missing from a high school band.

"I don't get nervous because I know all the music by heart," he says. "The professional musicians are a lot better technically. They also have more stage charisma. They know how to work with the crowd to get a higher energy level."

McBee says he has more hope for his life as a musician now that he's seen it is possible to make a living as a horn player in this city. "Because we have this gig going and each of us gets paid \$40 or so, that's the first time I've been paid for playing ever. Even if it isn't that much, it is something."

For the girls the future looks bright, although they aren't so wide-eyed they think it will come easy. But even without looking forward they understand this program continues to accomplish great things for them on a daily basis. Both girls agree the after school sessions of the R&B practice, combined with getting dressed up to shine on stage for an appreciative audience, has kept them motivated in the rest of their school classes. It has helped them deal with some personal challenges as well.

"Stage fright used to be a huge factor for me," says Arsenault, who moments before was belting out an amped up "Hold On, I'm Coming", complete with choreographed steps in front of her peers. "I used to be petrified. Since then I've come out of my shell and live to be on stage. It is the biggest adrenaline rush. Beating stage fright was the big accomplishment of my teenage years."

"You get to let go of all your inhibitions on stage," says Vierke.

"This is nothing," says Arsenault, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture over the half-full classroom. "We really go out there on stage."

The Midnights play every Thursday night at Sopranos, 1961 Douglas St. from 9 p.m. to midnight. The cover charge of \$5 buys you your first drink.