

DEEP
DIVE

How to Crack the Kids' Music Market

How One Club Owner Is Teaching Toddlers to Rock

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Black Tie Brass performing at Rock and Roll Playhouse Feb 23, 2020 | Marc Millman

**Steve Knopper**

Brooklyn Bowl's Peter Shapiro built a national network of family-friendly Rock & Roll Playhouses that turns kids on to the Grateful Dead, Springsteen and Bob Marley

Before the Grateful Dead turned him into a trippy psychedelic-rock icon, Casey Jones was the folk hero of a classic children's train song. But it turns out if you want to play the Dead's version for an audience of 1-to-12-year-olds, all you need to do is eliminate the phrase "high on cocaine."

"Honestly, we don't change all that much," says Mike Greenfield, drummer for Lotus, who adapts classic-rock covers for a decidedly under-21 crowd at Philadelphia's Ardmore Music Hall. "I tell the musicians, 'For the improv part, we take it mellow.'"

Greenfield's makeshift band is part of the Rock and Roll Playhouse, which promoter and Brooklyn Bowl co-owner Peter Shapiro hatched in 2014, when his kids were seven and four. At first, Shapiro's idea was to build a separate venue for family shows, but then he thought: "Wait a minute, I already have the venue: the Brooklyn Bowl. And what am I doing on a Saturday or Sunday at noon? Nothing." He studied the market and noticed kids' stars like Dan Zanes and Laurie Berkner doing one-off shows and tours, but no promoters were booking anything, let alone kids' shows, into their empty venues at noon on weekends.

"Parents fucking love it. You'd like to take your kid to a tribute to the Beatles or Marley or Talking Heads. And you just sing it kid-friendly. It's not that hard," Shapiro says. "The artists are psyched to do it, the venues are psyched to do it, the parents are psyched about it, so it's a good ecosystem."

And good business as well, giving clubs a chance to turn a profit twice on Saturday or Sundays. At \$12-20 per ticket, the shows average 200 to 500 people apiece, and most make money, Shapiro says. As Covid-19 quarantines took hold,

Shapiro quickly shifted the Playhouse performances to Facebook live streams, booking Michael Franti, members of String Cheese Incident and others. The first 20 Facebook drew about 20,000 views apiece, and Rock and Roll Playhouse now broadcasts seven days a week, giving kids (and parents) a chance to cut loose at 3:00 every weekday afternoon. Because promoters have avoided asking families for donations, sponsors such as In the Raw and Rockefeller Center provide essential support.

One of Shapiro's first moves was to hire Amy Striem, a former Village Community School teacher who Shapiro had met when their kids attended the same pre-school. Shapiro handled the concert side, like making sure the early-Saturday shows were properly loaded out by the time the grown-up bands showed up later that evening, and selling merch, non-alcoholic drinks and, occasionally, food. Striem took over the kids' logistics, including advising bands on repertoire, picking tracks appropriate for playtime activities (freezing in place and unfurling a colored parachute), and providing streamers and shakers.

The range of stars who have played shows or made appearances includes Questlove, George Porter Jr. of the Meters, Warren Haynes and the Dead's Phil Lesh himself. Most of the headliners have jam-band roots, and while Striem discourages long guitar solos, Greenfield says his band frequently plays 15-minute songs and everybody seems happy. But Striem insists on a firm one-hour show limit. "Everyone says, 'Can we do an hour and a half?'," she says. "And I say, 'I'm telling you, it's not going to work.' By 57 minutes in, that kid that was dancing on the floor is exhausted."

The program expanded quickly, from the Brooklyn Bowl to nearly 30 venues, including Thalia Hall in Chicago, First Avenue in Minneapolis and the Boulder Theater in Colorado. Finding musicians is easy: "There's usually a local cover band that's available on a Saturday and Sunday afternoon," Shapiro says.

"A lot of musicians may at first look down on it," says Greenfield, who is home-schooling his daughters, ages one and three, during the pandemic. "But I remember when I went to concerts when I was young and it was so transformative to me -- seeing Billy Joel when I was 10 years old, growing up on Long Island.

"My kids come to soundchecks, but they can't see me play," he continues. "But for this, my daughter came up and sat on my lap for a minute while I was playing and was holding my hand while I was holding the sticks. It was very special."