



## Clanking is encouraged at Youth Music Project's Cowbell Camp

by Matthew Bernstein on June 21, 2012



Summer memories for many kids are often founded upon camp experiences. Beautiful brochures entice parents to sign their children up for diverse offerings ranging from archery and robotics to roller coaster or cake decoration camps. It seems like summer simply explodes with camps to suit every child's interest. Too frequently, however, there are underserved youth in Oregon who never get to participate in a summer camp.

Welcome the [Youth Music Project](#) (YMP), a new nonprofit music school serving the Wilsonville and West Linn communities, established under the Marie Lamfrom Charitable Foundation. YMP has not only managed to come up with a totally unique opportunity for kids with its summer [Cowbell Camp](#), but the best part is that all YMP music programs are open to any kid.



*Charles Lewis, right, with a student.*

The Youth Music Project's mission is "to provide Rock, Country, and Pop music instruction and instrument rentals to any child in the community regardless of his or her ability to pay." Oregon Music News spoke with Executive Director Charles Lewis about this innovative summer camp as well as YMP's goals for the future.

In January 2012, Lewis was hired by the Marie Lamfrom Charitable Foundation to implement the Foundation's vision for Youth Music Project. Prior to working for the Foundation, Lewis was the Founder and Executive Director of Ethos Music Center, the largest nonprofit music school in Oregon.

"Like I did in my previous work, I plan on making YMP an amazing music school that is accessible to every child, regardless of income," Lewis says. "Everything we do is based on a sliding scale ranging from full price to 100 percent full scholarships. Once a kid is enrolled in our program, we will provide them with a high-quality instrument to use for free, and no one will know whether that child is on scholarship or not. At YMP, we treat every kid equally. Each student will have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of a music-based education.

"Our first project begins the week of June 25th. It will be a series of full-day summer camps. We have hired some outstanding staff members, including two district certified music teachers. Many of our instructors have previously taught at some of Oregon's most distinguished music schools such as Portland's School of Rock, the Rock and Roll Camp for Girls, the Shedd in Eugene, and at Ethos Music Center. We're off to a great start with our first three camps completely sold out and the remaining camps filling quickly," Lewis says.



It may come as a surprise that there is such a demonstrated need for financial assistance programs in Wilsonville and West Linn, outlying areas that aren't generally associated with poverty.

Lewis points out that "while the average household income is definitely higher than in the Portland area, there are large pockets of low-income families that are completely left out in the West Linn and Wilsonville area. If you look at the percentage of kids in each school district who are eligible for free or reduced lunch at school, which is a standard indicator of poverty, you'll find that 23.3 percent of the students in the West Linn and Wilsonville area are eligible, while 44.9 percent are eligible in Portland Public Schools. The biggest problem is that the number of social service agencies in Portland vastly out numbers the services available to low-income kids and families in our region.

"So far, 85 percent of the kids who have signed up for our summer camps are on free or reduced lunch at school. This

percentage is about double of what I achieved while working at Ethos Music Center, one of Oregon's best music resources for low-income kids. With generous foundation support, we're able to give these kids the same outstanding music education experience previously reserved for only the most affluent students," Lewis explains.

Lewis' dedication to providing a beneficial music education experience is apparent in every detail of YMP's summer program.

"YMP's summer camps are designed by educators to give students a truly immersive experience that combines making music with fun breakout sessions. All of our music classes have a very low staff-to-student ratio of no more than six students per instructor to insure the highest quality learning experience. We also conduct extensive background checks on our instructors including FBI fingerprint checks. Many for-profit companies and individual music instructors aren't nearly as strict with their procedures, but we want to be as proactive about safety for our students as possible," Lewis notes.

Well-qualified and engaging instructors are just one part of creating dynamic summer camps, but often it is intimidating to join a music camp, especially if a child questions his or her musical abilities. Lewis has already thought of that and factored it into his camp programming.



"In YMP's Cowbell Camp, every camp day begins with a half hour percussion jam circle during check in. This provides a group musical ice-breaker. Students will write, learn and perform songs that prominently feature the cowbell in addition to all of the regular rock band instruments including guitar, drums, bass, and keyboard. Kids love the cowbell because it's accessible and easy to play, but hard to master. People have spent a lifetime trying to get that 'dynamite sound' out of this important instrument. YMP's Cowbell Camp will give them an unprecedented level of instruction that will allow them to truly 'explore the room' as they master this vital but underappreciated instrument. The main idea is to use one fun, unifying theme to pull the entire camp together. We figure that everyone can use a little more cowbell in their lives! It also gives us an opportunity to reach kids who might be hesitant to play in an overly serious, inaccessible rock band," Lewis says.

Having fun making music is a big part of what Cowbell Camp is all about.

"Looking at hit songs throughout the ages, we know empirically what a dramatic effect the addition of cowbell can have on a song. For example, Cracked.com notes that Vanilla Ice released his own version of "Play That Funky Music" in 1990 without the trademark cowbell sound. Had Vanilla Ice recognized the true power of the cowbell and left it in his version of the song, he might still have a musical career today," Lewis remarks.



Who knew that the cowbell could be such an important addition to a song? Who was aware that there are over [600 songs](#) that feature the cowbell?

Lewis and his staff sure knew. Some of the YMP staff's favorites include a diverse mix that range from Aretha Franklin's "Rock Steady" to The Beastie Boys' "Hey Ladies" and The Beatles' "Drive My Car."

Of course, having fun is a necessary part of every summer camp experience. But, the YMP camps have found a creative balance which allows its dedicated instructors to teach students about all aspects of creating, performing and producing music.

"Students will create bands and will learn how to write and perform a number of songs together by the end of camp. Music classes will be intertwined with breakout classes that will teach kids how to screen print their own band t-shirts, set up and run sound, make band art and flyers, and record and edit 3D videos," Lewis says.

While students are welcome to bring their own instruments, YMP will provide instruments for any kid that needs one.



"With generous Foundation support, we're able to purchase state of the art equipment that gives us the best tools for teaching music. A quick look at our equipment makes even professional musicians salivate, including half a dozen brand new Roland V-Drum sets, Breedlove Guitars, American-made Fender Stratocasters and Telecasters, etc. We believe that high-quality instruments are critical for starting kids on the right path for a lifelong appreciation of music," Lewis explains.

As the oft-quoted saying goes: "It takes a village." And Lewis is quick to thank those individuals and companies in the community who have already supported the Marie Lamfrom Charitable Foundation's efforts in creating the Youth Music Project.

"A few of our supporters include Audix Microphones that donated a dozen of their best microphones, Breedlove Guitars that outfitted us with some seriously sweet acoustic guitars, Behringer that set us up with two complete sound systems, and Moonstruck Chocolates that gave all of our instructors boxes of mouth-watering chocolates. We've got the best supporters around!" Lewis exclaims.

But, Lewis' vision for YMP does not stop at summer's end.

"I'm happy to report that yesterday YMP finalized an agreement to purchase a 12,385-square-foot building in the heart of West Linn's Historic District. This building will serve as a regional music-based community center and will feature a 300-person, all-ages performance venue, 17 classrooms, a dance studio, a music cafe, and a 'music store with a mission' for kids and adults. We plan on opening for business in December 2012 and will start giving lessons onsite in January 2013," Lewis says.

With Lewis in charge there is sure to be more opportunities for underserved youth in the community to make all kinds of music.

*YMP's summer camps start on Monday, June 25th and Cowbell Camp kicks off on July 23rd. Camp locations will alternate between Rosemont Ridge Middle School in West Linn and Wilsonville High School. To get involved as a volunteer, or to donate funds or an instrument, please send an email to [donate \[at\] youthmusicproject.org](mailto:donate@youthmusicproject.org) or call 503.616.5967.*