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The Music Coop fills a void in local musical training

By John T. Miller



Jennifer Grossi warms up the microphone in the Music Coop's rock band studio. Photo John T. Miller

The Music Coop, with studios in Walnut Creek and Lafayette, is filling a void in musical instruction caused by the closure of other venues and cutbacks in elementary music programs.

Jennifer Grossi, who runs Music Coop, said, "When Red House Studios in Walnut Creek closed, the instructors needed somewhere to go. We couldn't maintain the space because the rent was so high."

She ended up partnering with three other instructors from Red House and moved into offices on Tice Creek Boulevard that had been recently vacated by a group of lawyers.

"We didn't have a plan, but we just wanted to keep the music going," she said. The space was not ideal, but rather than reconfigure the lawyer offices, a tutoring center around the corner, with six perfect rooms for studios, became available in the same Tice Valley Plaza Center.

In May of this year, Grossi added the location on Golden Gate Way in Lafayette. Currently, there are 15 instructors using 10 studio rooms between the two locations.

With the closing of Campana Music (see article in the Aug. 8 issue), the Music Coop will add some of the instructors who have been put out of business there.

"It's a really interesting time in the world of music," says Grossi. She explains that the difference for the Music Coop instructors is that they are independent and manage their own students. Rather than getting paid an hourly wage, the instructors pay for use of studio space.

Vince Lay, a talented guitarist, singer and songwriter, spent 10 years at Red House Studios teaching youth summer camps and youth and adult rock band programs and workshops.

Asked about the difference working with Music Coop as opposed to other studios, Lay says, "Working at the coop is fantastic! I run my own business but get to work in a supportive group environment. Teachers can share students and refer students to one another, and can work together on events, recitals, and things like advertising as well." Lay enjoys making his own hours and speaking with his clients directly instead of through some sort of manager. "I customize my lessons and classes, which is great because none of my students are the same, and no one learns exactly the same way."

Lay taught ukulele camps over the summer at the Golden Gate Way location, and he also teaches guitar, bass and helps put kids' rock bands together.

While an overwhelming love of music compels Grossi, a background in finance and investment banking helps her run and manage the spaces. At the age of 16 she sang with a band in the '80s, and more recently fronted an '80s tribute band.

The Music Coop focused primarily on rock and roll, but with school music program cuts, along with Campana Music closing, and, soon, Jam Brothers on Boulevard Way in Saranap going out of business, Grossi has added instructors in classical music, string instruments and woodwinds.

This summer, in addition to ukulele camps, the Music Coop held rock band camps, and workshops for vocalists age 12-17 years, who could bring in a song and make it performance-ready in four hours.

Grossi anticipates forming a band workshop for eight weeks that finishes with them recording a demo at Modern Tones Studio (on Almanor Lane in Lafayette), whose primary focus is recording. Rock band formation instructors with real-life experience work with musicians from middle school age all the way to adults.

While music instruction is typically slow during the summer months, once school kicks in Grossi believes there will be stiff competition for studio time.

One goal of the Music Coop is to get students on stage and let them perform. Grossi partners with the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce for its Art and Wine Festival, providing entertainment for the Family Stage, and the students also participate in a holiday celebration at Up The Creek records.

One of the difficulties with running a music studio, according to Grossi, is "finding a place where you can play music without the neighbors complaining. We want to be the best neighbors we can be but we also want to play music." So far, they've been musically noisy, their neighbors have been relatively quiet, and the respective landlords have been cooperative.

For more information on the Music Coop and a list of instructors and programs, visit www.mymusiccoop.com.

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