

# THE NEW CANON

## Studying the Classics at the Paul Green School of Rock

BY DANIEL MORRELL

It was as if, for one night only, the North Star had been converted into a junior high school auditorium. At the back of the Fairmount club the bar served up lemon-lime soda pop to thirteen year-old girls who gossiped energetically about who liked Bobby while parents fired up their camcorders to capture the opening notes of the March recital.

The guitarist C.J. Tywoniak was still recovering from leg surgery and hobbled to the stage on crutches. Tywoniak was about to perform works from Frank Zappa's Hot Rats, Sheik Yerbouti, and One Size Fits All, albums noted for combining several musical genres into complex song structures that can intimidate even the most adept adult musicians. But nine year-old Tywoniak would not be denied. His tiny fingers stretched in emulation of Zappa's own reach as he nailed down the lead with mature authority.

Beside the stage, just outside the spotlight's halo, stood a short, stout figure, whipping the band up into a cacophonous frenzy. At the end of the song, the impresario plucked young Tywoniak off the stage and readied the amps and microphones for the next number. This was Paul Green, the founder, director, conductor, roddie and front-row cheerleader for the Paul Green School of Rock.

Green is a boyish and slightly disheveled thirty-year-old, with messy brown hair and eyes flashing with manic energy, like they've got something they just have to tell you. He wears ragged jeans with faded monochrome t-shirts and sneakers. It is the uniform of the diehard rock apostle, so devoted to its tenets that he has followed them into an extended adolescence.

The school traces its origins back to 1998, when Green, who taught one-on-one guitar lessons in his living room, began to hold informal student jam sessions. That fall, a small group of Green disciples was invited to perform at a first Friday art opening held at the now-defunct Griffin Cafe in Old City. A packed house watched in amazement. The crowd liked watching kids play rock. Through his student shows and through word-of-mouth, Green took on more students. He quit his job cutting fish for seven dollars an hour at Reading Terminal Market. He married Lisa Soden, the lead singer for the band Sweet Pussy. They had a son, Walden. The school has also borne fruit. Green now teaches rock and roll to 130 students out of two floors of an office building in Chinatown.

The Paul Green School of Rock is not just a school in the sense that it takes students and holds classes, it is also a school of thought, much like the Frankfurt School of social theory and the Chicago School of economics. Long after his students graduate and scatter across the earth, Green hopes they will continue to spread his particular doctrine of rock, complete with its own strict methodology and hallowed canon of greats. The School disdains the melancholy and "soft" sects of the rock and roll genre, prizing instead bold and anthemic artists—Green calls them "musically muscular"—who the students emulate through hours of intense rehearsal.

"I'm not an aesthetic relativist," said Green, who holds a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. "I believe there is such a thing as good art and bad art, and that the trained mind can tell the difference. Rock music now sucks. If Radiohead was around in '72, they would be like the forty-fifth best band out there... I'll take Grand Funk Railroad over them."

If Green were teaching philosophy, Frank



PHOTO: BENJAMIN TAYLOR

Zappa would probably hold the place of G.W.F. Hegel or Ludwig Wittgenstein on the syllabus—the really hard stuff that you only give to doctoral ninjas who have the training and patience to handle it. Novice students begin with the basics of 1980s rock, from the early Beastie Boys carol "Fight For Your Right to Party," to the utopian hymn "We Are the World." The intermediate syllabus consists of Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, the Who, Queen, Eric Clapton, and Santana. Eventually, Green's best students are permitted to tackle Zappa. It is at shows featuring these advanced students that school's goal is most apparent—to wow the audience with difficult material gracefully performed by juvenile progenies, to have fans show up expecting to cheer on a ragtag gang of amateurs and leave totally blown away by some of the most proficient rock musicians they have ever encountered live.

"The thing that works best with the kids is the 'I can't believe the kids are playing that stuff' material," says Green. While any mainstream classic rock disk jockey would find the school's theory of what counts as rock and roll to be parochial, Green says he tries to keep an open mind.

"If we played only what I liked, we'd just do four Jethro Tull shows every week," jokes Green, who is training a flutist for just such an event. Jimi Hendrix and David Bowie also make the cut, but the school dismisses the legendary status of other so-called "greats."

"Stevie Ray Vaughan was a bitch," Green said in earnest, before venturing an even bolder hypothesis: "The Beatles suck."

Flamboyant and unconsidered pronouncements like these are part of what makes Green that rare cool teacher; the one who has a passion for something more dear to his students than mathematics or history; the one whose willingness to dismiss all outside authority resonates in the hearts of his teenage flock, who take him as their own model for how to be a compelling and effective rebel.

When the kids begin to stream into the school at 2:30 one afternoon, Green shifts into his highest gear. He is giving an interview, answering the phone, advising a hopeful rock school founder from St. Louis, gently jolting the students, and denouncing modern music all at the same time. Green's maniacal laugh and wiry brown hair, now on end, both seem to grow in volume as the kids pour into the school. He is a show all in himself, feeding off the attention of the students who have finally

found an adult they can respect, perhaps because, like them, Green has kept his compromises to an absolute minimum.

Entering 1320 Race Street, the receptionist for the first floor Local 8 Stagehand Union office directs visitors to a jittery elevator ride up to the Paul Green School of Rock, which occupies the second and third floors. Green's desk sits at the edge of an open array of couches surrounded by walls adorned with the faces of Hendrix, Page, Bowie and Young. Whatever space is left is covered by posters for the students' shows and pictures of them performing. A gaggle of children sit around in this living room and roam about, wrestling and joshing each other like cousins who've always lived in the same town. The halls are strewn with amplifiers and recording equipment. The third floor has a Thom Lessner mural on the wall depicting numerous mythical rock figures, assembled in a pantheon as unlikely and stunning as the statues lining the walls of St. Peter's Basilica.

As Green shows his charges how to play the right chords and strike the right poses, his entire enterprise also provides the students with an apprenticeship in another kind of performance art that will occupy the majority of their remaining waking hours—commerce. After three decades of iconoclasm, Green has learned that a career of unsubsidized, full-time rebellion can't last unless it negotiates a shaky truce with the free-market system. Green has managed to do this, to find his own sweet spot on the slippery middle ground between burning out and selling out. He has succeeded the hard way, building a small business that allows him to get paid while retaining total control over his project. That project is something that transcends fixing leaky pipes or serving up a good hot meal. Green makes a living providing what may arguably be two of most essential services in any community—the transmission of cultural knowledge, and keeping track of kids after they're let out of school.

"I actually make a lot of money," Green said. "I make enough money to support a family." With all of the positive media attention Green has received from the likes of Spin and the Associated Press, he has even toyed with the notion of franchising the idea, "a Rock School in every strip mall, like Tae Bo," but this would be improbable, "unless I can clone myself." Green has no qualms with making money from rock and roll and says he would welcome further improvements to his standard

of living. "I believe you get rocking, you get a bus, you trash hotel rooms. That's rock and roll." But most of the time, Green appears more than satisfied with where the school is right now. When a student presented Green with a tuition payment in cash, Green, who had been halfheartedly pressing kids for their payments all afternoon, was shocked. "Whoa, you actually have it?" he asked, and proceeded to dance around while folding the bills into his pocket.

In lieu of a franchise, Green's working plan for financial security involves renovating the third floor, at a cost of \$8,000, to include a parents' lounge, more practice spaces, and snack bar. "The kids are always running someplace else to get snacks, so why not just have it here?"

Compared to Harvard, Princeton, and the rest of America's most learned babysitters, tuition at the Paul Green School of Rock is a bargain. Every kid can browse the all-you-can-eat buffet of rock and roll learning. They can take lessons from Green's staff of fifteen instructors, use the space to practice, learn how to repair their instruments, and come in as often as they want. The kids that can afford it pay a flat fee of one hundred dollars per month, which helps fund a scholarship program for the kids that can't. Forty percent of the school's students get full or partial scholarships, which add up to about \$20,000 annually. The students range in age from six to nineteen. "It's like Menudo," Green said. "When the kids get past high school, they're out."

Green teaches rock and roll like it was boarding school Latin. In other words, he is a fanatic looking for acolytes who will join him in worshipping the material. He is one of the first to train the current generation just how seriously they ought to take the entertainments of their parents.

When asked just how he goes about teaching, Green turned to the crowd of students gathered around him.

"You suck—practice. You suck—practice! You suck—PRACTICE!" he shouted, pointing his finger at three random kids. They stared at their shoes and laughed.

"That's how I teach."

This is where Green feels modern rock has gone wrong—too much time spent cultivating attitudes and posing for photographs, and not enough hard work attending to technique.

"Jimi Hendrix didn't just appear out of somebody's garage. He played with the Isley Brothers, Little Richard, the Army band. He learned how to play. Take Mitch Mitchell. He was a good drummer, but not one of the greats. But that guy can play the hell out of the snare drum, because someone sat him down at a snare drum and made him do rudiments."

Green would like nothing more than to be remembered as the apocryphal figure who appeared in the formative years of tomorrow's rock and roll legends, fanning the spark of a young talent into a mighty blaze with the bellows of his teachings. With his help, perhaps today's C.J. Tywoniaks might blossom into tomorrow's Frank Zappas.

"If you feel that a certain thing is good, then I feel a moral responsibility to plant the seeds of that good," says Green. "To teach kids that they are not limited. If you are unafraid and diligent, it's amazing what you can do."

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