

School of garage rock

Yoni Leviatan just landed the gig of his life: eighth through 12th grades. **BY BOB WEINBERG**

Slouched around a couple of faux-wood-grained tables in a nondescript classroom, a group of high-school students grooves to tunes by The Fray, Jack's Mannequin, Jet, John Mayer and even The Beatles and The Police. It's the middle of the school day, but they're not goofing off—they're in class. More specifically, they're in garage-band class, a three-part workshop being offered as part of the curriculum at the newly minted Conservatory Prep Senior High. A school for arts-minded students in grades 8 through 12, it's headquartered at the David Posnack Jewish Community Center in Davie and allied with the University of Miami Online High School, which oversees the operation and offers online academic courses. At \$15,500 a year, its tuition is comparable to that of many colleges.

At the head of the class, Yoni Leviatan, a 28-year-old South Florida musician recruited to walk the kids through the ins and outs of songwriting, production and life in the music biz, pulls up MP3 files on a laptop connected to a pair of large speakers. With his shaved head, T-shirt and baggy jeans, he could almost pass for one of the students— or at least one of their hip older brothers. "With really good songwriting," he instructs his



No more books: Yoni Leviatan performs "Twentysomething," the song he licensed to MTV, for students in his garage-band workshop at Conservatory Prep in Davie.

"If there's anything like a level playing field for up-and-coming musicians, it's MySpace."

—Yoni Leviatan, to his garage-band class

students during this segment on production, "you don't have to do a whole lot."

By way of example, Leviatan clicks on a tune by The Fray and points out how it starts with just piano and vocals before the drums enter, the tempo shifts,

and the song crescendoes with the chorus. Other parts of the exercise include contrasting Jimi Hendrix's "The Wind Cries Mary" with Jamie Cullum's recent cover of it and discussing production techniques used on songs by everyone from Kelly Clarkson to Helio, Goodbye to the band that inspired the latter's moniker.

"The most classic song of all time," Leviatan rhapsodizes as majestic, mournful strings swell behind Paul McCartney's melancholic acoustic guitar on The Beatles' "Yesterday." "That's all there is to it. Just because you have all these [production] tools doesn't mean you have to use them."

HE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION

Leviatan knows of what he speaks. The musician and songwriter, who grew up in Coral Springs, has had some success in the national arena. His angsty, coming-of-age tune "Twentysomething" was licensed by MTV for use on the shows *Real World/Road Rules Challenge* and *Real World/Road Rules Challenge: The Duel*, as well as by the Oxygen Network. To the best of his knowledge, it hasn't aired yet. "I don't even know if they'll call me and tell me. I hope so," Leviatan says, washing down a turkey wrap with a couple of beers at Beef O'Brady's after a recent class. "I hope I'll get notice that it's going to be on, but it might just be that I get a royalty check or a friend tells me, 'Hey, by the way, it's on.'"

Leviatan, who is in the process of recording a solo CD, had originally submitted "Twentysomething" for a contest being held by Broadjam.com, an online indie-music showcase. Winning submissions were included on a compilation titled *College Credit: Indie Rock 101*. "Twentysomething" was the top vote-getter and received all kinds of airplay—especially on college radio—as the leadoff track to the collection. "It was peer voting, so I like that it wasn't just that someone said, 'Yeah, it's a good song' but that enough people liked it, like an *American Idol* thing," Leviatan says.

His garage-band class on the business of music is particularly interesting because he relates his own experiences as an independent artist who managed to get a tenacious toehold on national fame using little more than the Internet and his own gumption.

"You guys use MySpace?" he asks the students. "Like every five seconds," someone answers. "If there's anything like a level playing field [for up-and-coming musicians], it's MySpace," he tells them.

The singer seems to have won over some fans among Conservatory Prep's student body, too. The kids beg him to perform at the end of the class, and they respond enthusiastically to his acoustic version of "Twentysomething." Of course, they're also eager to show off their own talents. Belinda Bruno-Piverger, a shy 14-year-old, is coaxed into singing an a cappella rendition of Alicia Keys' "Caged Bird" and delivers a

Liner notes

1. Yoni Leviatan grew up in Inverrary and Coral Springs and started playing guitar at age 4.
2. Director Zairim King wanted to use one of Leviatan's tunes on the 1998 NBC series *Wind on Water*, but the show was canceled before the songwriter could record the track.
3. Next school year, Conservatory Prep will offer a *Stomp!* course, in which students will create percussion instruments out of junkyard debris and learn to perform on them.
4. Web site: CONSERVATORYPREP.ORG



Singles files: Leviatan teaches production by playing MP3s of pop hits.

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quiet but emotional read. Brielle Rassler, 15, teeters on a soft leg cast as she offers what sounds like a very personal original song, her pretty voice made more vulnerable by her quavering vibrato. Attired in a T-shirt with cartoons illustrating the phrase "I don't give a rat's ass," Bob Bergey, 14, gives a heartfelt rendition of Billy Joel's "Piano Man," his voice slightly trembling as he reads the words off a page he printed from the Internet. As the school's literary-magazine editor, Bergey has impressed his instructors with his fine writing more so than his vocal prowess.

"They all have their fortes," explains Conservatory Prep's founder and principal, Wendy Hirsch Weiner. "Some are more into music, some are more into theater, some are more into art. But the thing is, they're all artsy kids. So everybody gets trained in multiple areas; that's just part of their day."

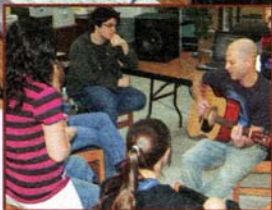
TAKING NOTES

"What I do mainly is theater," says Jesse Nevel, a studious-looking 17-year-old who carefully measures his words. "Outside of that, my main interest is comedy. That's what I want to do professionally."

While improvisation and drama are his favorite classes, Nevel's enjoying the garage-band class and the chance to learn about both the creative and business sides of the music industry. "Even though I don't want to be a musician," he relates, "I still find it interesting."

Taylor Penta, the 15-year-old drummer whose playing in local rock bands inspired the school to offer this workshop, *does* want to be a musician, but he's not exactly riveted by Leviatan's class. True to his rocker pedigree, Penta, whose wrists and forearms are ringed by a colorful riot of beads and bracelets he has collected at the raves he frequents, has missed one of the three garage-band classes and looks bored as hell when he is there. During a break, he puts his head down on the table to catch some z's.

"Most of it I already knew," he explains after



class. "I have a promoter who's already got a label, so he tells me what to do. Personally, my mom made me come here."

Still, Leviatan enjoys an easy rapport with the students, managing to keep them on topic even when they digress with commentary about *American Idol* or flatter him incessantly. His well-organized presentation even makes available a CD loaded with documents, including samples of a business plan and a sponsorship proposal.

Leviatan has so impressed Principal Weiner that she has invited him to join the faculty next year, when garage-band class will be offered twice weekly. He's looking forward to the opportunity to work with the kids more intensively, maybe even have them record.

In the meantime, he continues to pursue his dream of supporting himself primarily with his music. With solo and band gigs at venues such as Automatic Slim's in Fort Lauderdale, Purdy Lounge in Miami Beach and Club M in Hollywood and his aptly titled CD *Extra Credit* due out this summer, Leviatan is following his two-pronged attack to build a following locally as well as online. If he heeds his advice to his students, he just might make it to that level of what he calls "middle-class" musicians — not the ones who live in mansions, but the ones who make decent livings doing what they love. "At the end of the day," he imparts to his class, "it's about the product. Have a good product, and I guarantee a lot of great things will happen for you."

To find out where Yoni Leviatan will be performing, visit SongsOfYoni.com.

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