

NEWS

'Light years ahead': York County guitar phenom, 15, heads to Memphis for major competition



Mike Argento

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A couple of years back, Quentin Jones was doing an online guitar seminar when he was introduced to Alex Lee Warner.

It was during the pandemic, and Quentin, who is a touring guitarist based in central Pennsylvania, having been on the road with acts as varied as Herman's Hermits, Bow Wow Wow, and Marshall Crenshaw, was doing some online work, teaching and offering guitar seminars.

During one of those seminars, he heard Alex play, and from the first note, Quentin said, "I knew he had something special."

It was something about Alex's skill and phrasing and just his natural talent that caught his ear. "The kid is a natural," Quentin said. "He has all the skills."

At the time, Alex was maybe 13 years old, and he already possessed proficiency on the instrument that impressed the veteran guitarist. "In my world," Quentin said, "success in mastering the instrument, making it communicate, he already can do that."

It was unusual, a kid who at an age when a lot of kids are trying to master video games such as Final Fantasy or Tekken, Alex was trying to master the work of guitar players who passed away long before he was born: the blues masters and their musical progeny.

The now 15-year-old Dallastown Area High School freshman hasn't mastered the instrument – anyone who plays guitar will tell you that, although there are masters, nobody ever conquers the instrument – it has taken him a long way, from trying to figure out Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Child" in his bedroom to the International Blues Challenge in Memphis, the home of the blues.

'Light years ahead of anybody his age'

This week, Alex was in Nashville, playing with a band of fellow teens before heading to Memphis to play a showcase at the blues challenge, a kind of in-real-life search for blues talent sponsored by the Blue Foundation, an organization dedicated to keeping the spirit of the most American genre of music alive.

At 15, he is an accomplished guitarist, skilled beyond his years, players who have decades of experience over him say. Mark Romeo, a 65-year-old guitarist from Lemoyne who has been playing guitar "since the Nixon Administration" and who has played with Alex on several occasions at blues jams, said, "He's only getting better. He's light years ahead of anybody his age."

'I need to play the guitar'

Alex always wanted to be a rock star. When he was a kid – well, younger than he is now – he would pick up a baseball bat and pretend to play the guitar.

When he was about 8, he found his father's old Yamaha acoustic guitar in the back of a closet and made it his. His mother, Bambi, bought the guitar as a birthday gift for her then-boyfriend, Ben, when they were dating, a \$99 Yamaha discount-store special. Ben never really picked it up and for years it sat unplayed. When Alex

discovered it, it was practically new. (The Yamaha is gone now; Alex accidentally stepped on it and broke its neck.)

Alex was infatuated with the instrument. But it was a YouTube video that lit a fire in him. His dad showed him a video of the late Texas blues great Stevie Ray Vaughan playing Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Child" on "Austin City Limits."

There was something about the song and Stevie Ray's performance that just grabbed his attention. In the video, Stevie Ray grimaces and grins and sweats profusely as he wrings the blues-rock classic out of his iconic beat-to-hell Stratocaster for all its worth, every note carrying the weight of the world.

It was a revelation to Alex. "What got me was his emotion when he played," he said. "Going into the solo, he's yelling and screaming."

It was at that moment he knew what he wanted to do. "It's like when people pick up a sport, they know that's what they wanted to do. That's what I decided what I wanted to do."

That Christmas, when he was 8, his grandparents – "coolest grandparents in the world," he says – got him an electric guitar, a cheap Stratocaster knock-off, from Amazon.

"For six months," he said, "I never put that guitar down. It was like it was a part of me."

The first song he learned to play was "Voodoo Child," he said.

He took a few lessons from a traditional teacher who wanted to teach him to read music and play "Mary Had a Little Lamb," but he wanted to play like Stevie, or like Joe Bonamassa, or like the blues masters who paved the way for the more modern practitioners of the blues. "The whole thing about reading music, I couldn't do it," he said.

Not long after, he quit the formal lessons, he was at the Guitar Spot shop in Red Lion playing "Voodoo Child" on a vintage Stratocaster when Tery Alexander emerged from the back of the shop where he gives lessons.

Alexander told him, "You sound pretty good, man." Trey then asked for the guitar and played the song. "It was a pretty special day," Alex said.

For his 10th birthday, he said, he got lessons from Trey, studying with him for about a year. Trey was a good teacher, he said. "He was like, 'Show me what you know. Tell me what you know' and went from there," Alex said. Trey taught him about chords and scales and how they interact and how they sound together.

Eight months in, he said, he spotted a guitar in the shop, a blue Fender Stratocaster Deluxe. He played the guitar every time he went to the shop, and that Christmas it was under the tree. "I played it non-stop for a good two, three years," he said.

Then COVID hit, and in-person lessons were off the table.

That's when he found Quentin Jones, or Quentin found him, on that online guitar seminar. Jones said he didn't have a lot to teach Alex. At that point, he said, Alex was on his way, musically speaking. Quentin mentored him on the business end and how to understand music, dynamics, timing and phrasing. "He taught me so much more about the diversity of music, how music works," Alex said. "There's a whole world out there of music that I had to learn about."

For instance, he was playing diminished chords before he even knew what diminished chords were. "Quentin taught me how to understand it," he said. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have made major steps in my playing."

He said, "Trey and Quentin made me who I am. It was the best of both worlds."

He plays constantly. "The guitar's like a part of my body," he said. "It's how I express myself and express my emotions. It's one of those things, like an emotional thing. I pick it up and hold it and feel it. To some people, it's

just a hunk of wood with strings. But to me, it's how I express my emotions. It's a need. I need to play the guitar."

'I was in my element'

The first time he took the stage was at the DreamWrights theater in York. He was playing with a pickup group and was "super nervous" and "shaking" at the prospect of playing in front of an audience.

They played Gary Clark Jr.'s "Bright Lights."

"As soon as I got on stage," he said, "I was completely fine. It felt like I was flowing. I felt like I was in my element."

From there, he began going to open mics and blues jams, most notably the Central Pennsylvania Blues Society's weekly jams in Highspire, south of Harrisburg near Middletown. "I love it there," he said. "I met a lot of people there."

He is one of the few regulars, perhaps the only one whose mom has to drive him to the jam. (Other parents drive kids to soccer games; Alex's parents take him to bars to play music.)

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At one of the jams, Anthony "Big A" Sherrod, who's from the heart of blues country, Clarksdale, Miss., called him up on stage and started a tune, expecting Alex to sing. "I thought I'd just play guitar," Alex said. "He forced me to sing. It was the first time I sang in front of a crowd."

It went fine. Nobody was hurt, he said.

The blues jams led to other gigs, including a showcase in 2021 at the Central Pennsylvania Hall of Fame Music Awards at the Englewood Brewery near Hershey and other showcases. (This year, he was nominated for Central Pennsylvania Hall of Fame awards for best youth band and best cover song for his cover of The Who's "Baba O'Riley" with the Youth All-Star Band.) He's played at a blues festival in East Petersburg, Pa., and at the Kennett Square summer concert series in Chester County, among other gigs.

He's played with a youth band in Nashville and the week of Jan. 14, he went to Nashville to play a showcase there before heading to Memphis for the International Blues Challenge. Later, he plans to play at the Juke Joint Festival in Clarksdale, Miss.

Jamming with the old folks

The week before leaving for Tennessee, Alex, accompanied by his parents, went to a jam at the Underground Live in Cumberland County. The venue sponsored the gathering to help raise money for his trip to the International Blues Challenge. The Central Pennsylvania Blues Society kicked in \$500 and individual members also contributed to the cause.

He took the stage sometime after 7:30 p.m. with some musicians in the crowd. It was striking. He was playing with two guitar players and a drummer who could have easily been his grandfathers. (His grandparents were there.)

The jam was, as they frequently are during such pick-up things, a little loose. But Alex's playing was solid. His phrasing and timing were spot on. His tone, wrested from a custom Twin Dix Strat-style guitar, was fat. He played with dynamics, from soft to screaming, and style reminiscent of his idol Stevie Ray. He sped through fill licks and bent strings to make the guitar sing. (About the guitar, it was made for him by luthiers in The Buck in Lancaster County, custom made to his specs with a sycamore body and spalted maple top and ziricote fretboard and pickguard, fitted with Seymour Duncan pickups. "It's an incredible piece of art," Alex said. "In Nashville, I played a '58 Strat and it's as good as that.")

Standing on stage, wearing jeans, a black T-shirt and white Nikes, he closes his eyes as he plays fluid blues lines, punctuated with stinging bends and smooth vibrato. “He’d be up there for hours if he could,” his mother said.

The pickup band broke into ZZ Top’s “Waiting for the Bus.” Alex played some Billy F. Gibbons-style licks and then broke into a solo that went beyond anything the Reverend played on the song.

He was smiling.

Columnist/reporter Mike Argento has been a York Daily Record staffer since 1982. He has also played guitar since he was 15 and should be a lot better than he is. Reach him at mike@ydr.com.