

CULTURE SHLOCK

Bullying takes a beating

Like most parents of school-age children, I think of myself as open-minded to new, innovative educational approaches — just as long as they're no different from the way I was taught, that is. Which is why I was more than a little dismayed to discover that my daughter's second-grade class was doing a unit on, of all things, bullying.



MALCOLM FLESCHER

Bullying! Call me old-fashioned if you must, but I remember a time when kids were more self-reliant, and didn't need to be taught how to bully one another.

"What's next," I demanded of the teacher, "lessons on how to throw spitballs, give each other wedgies, and all the different ways to make disgusting underarm noises?"

At this point my daughter intervened, patiently explaining that the lesson was about the dangers of bullying, and things kids could do to stop classmates from engaging in bullying behaviors. I guess she learned pretty well, judging by how quickly she calmed me down and got me to stop trying to give the teacher a noogie.

All joking aside, it's refreshing to see society finally getting serious about this problem. In the old days, schools tended to ignore bullying behavior, thanks to the prevailing attitude of "boys will be boys" and "girls will be ignored."

But today educators are addressing this widespread problem thanks to a range of factors, including an increased awareness of the long-term damage bullying inflicts on kids, threats of legal action against the schools, and the extra time that teachers and administrators now have ever since smoking on school property was banned.

Of course, tradition has long held that the best way to deal with a bully is to stand up for yourself. The underlying theory is that bullies are really cowards at heart, and when they're confronted, will inevitably turn tail and run. You know how some pieces of folk wisdom, even ones that by modern standards seem simplistic or outdated, can actually hold a great deal of truth? Well this isn't one of them. If my childhood experience is any guide, standing up to a bully only "solves the problem" if your problem is that your mouth has too many teeth in it.

One added complication is that, like everything else these days, bullying is more complicated than it used to be. Today, in addition to verbal harassment and physical abuse (the classics), kids have to deal with the advent of "cyber-bullying." This, according to Wikipedia, is when bullies "use e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites and blogs to bully their victims."

Teacher: "Mr and Mrs. Wilson, while I'm pleased that little Tommy has been improving his writing skills this semester and shown a genuine aptitude for technology, unfortunately, he's been doing it all in order to mercilessly humiliate and torment his classmates. But on the bright side, this may bode well for his future as a political consultant."

Meanwhile, experts predict that the cyber-bullying problem will only get worse later this year when, as expected, Apple releases the new iBully app for the iPhone.

In truth, most of my increased awareness about bullying in schools today comes from my friend Rosalind Wiseman. She's the well-known author of "Queen Bees and Wannabes" (Crown, 352 pages, \$18), the book that opened many readers' eyes to the vicious hierarchical world of adolescent girls and spawned the Lindsay Lohan movie "Mean Girls." I mention this because Rosalind's work represents a great resource for anyone interested in stopping bullying — and not because, as some have implied, I'm a shameless name-dropper who tries to artificially boost his column's online page view numbers by mentioning celebrities for no apparent reason. Celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, Lady Gaga, topless Britney Spears — those types.

But what many top experts today suggest is that the best way for schools to stop bullying is for all the interested parties — bullies, kids who are being bullied, other students in the class, parents, teachers, administrators, etc. — to sit down and hash out a solution together. This way the community takes responsibility for the path forward, and also creates consequences for continued bullying that's enforced by everyone involved (I'm oversimplifying, of course, but I'm in the media — that's what we do).

So I've definitely come around, and now appreciate that our schools are actively combating the problem of bullying. And while it's probably unrealistic to hope to eradicate bullying entirely, we can all work toward that goal, in part by learning more about what's really going on in kids' lives today. And what better way to start, as I'm sure my friend would agree, than by buying Rosalind's new book, "Boys, Girls and Other Hazardous Materials" (Putnam Juvenile, 288 pages, \$17.99), which is by far the best piece of young adult fiction I've ever read that mentions me by name.

Malcolm welcomes reader questions about bullying, modern educational theory or effective name-dropping at Malcolm@CultureShlock.com



Guitarist Terrence Brewer is to perform on Sunday at Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society in Half Moon Bay.

Photo by Kara Wood

Go 'Wes,' young man Terrence Brewer essays music of legendary guitarist

BY PAUL FREEMAN
For The Daily News

Magic fingers: Wes Montgomery certainly had them. So does Alameda guitarist Terrence Brewer.

Joined by B3 organist Wayne De La Cruz, saxophonist Jim Grantham and drummer Micah McClain, Brewer performs a tribute to Wes Montgomery at Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society this Sunday. He presented this impressive show at the Monterey Jazz Festival.

Brewer explained to The Daily News why he admires Montgomery. "Like Charlie Parker, Lester Young or John Coltrane are for saxophone players, Wes, with a single-note, bebop style, had that sort of impact on guitar players.

"Charlie Christian set the foundation in the '30s and '40s for that single-note style, having guitar players be able to match horn players. But Wes took it to the next level and created sounds that were unique to the instrument. He's probably one of the cleanest guitar players you've ever heard. His style is just so beautiful. The sound is impeccable, very neat and at very fast tempos a lot of times."

Brewer's latest album, "Groovin' Wes," offers Montgomery compositions, as well as standards the legend helped to popularize.

"I play finger-style like Wes. I think I have pretty fat, round tones, similar to what Wes had. I knew that comparisons were going to come. So I wanted to diffuse that somewhat.

"I put a quote on the back of the CD that a lot of guitar players can imitate Wes Montgomery and I'm really just trying to pay tribute to him with my own voice. I wasn't trying to replicate a Wes Montgomery album. I wanted to say, 'These are some of the songs that he did that inspired me tremendously.' So I'm perfectly comfortable with people saying I do sound like Wes or I don't sound like Wes."

Immersing himself in Montgomery techniques has enhanced Brewer's own style. "The lineage of jazz is to soak up as much as you can from the masters and then, hopefully, come out the other side of it with your own voice.

"Certainly, in transcribing all of these Wes Montgomery songs and improvisations, and in listening to hours and hours of Wes Montgomery, I can't help but take some of that in. Hopefully I've brought that into my own sensibility in my playing."

The Half Moon Bay venue is ideal for this set. "For jazz musicians, anytime we get to perform in an environment like Bach, which is so intimate, has great acoustics, for a crowd that is very jazz savvy, it's always a treat," said Brewer.

"In introducing some of the songs, I'll talk a little bit about Wes and his influence on me. To have a crowd that will understand where I'm going with that will be a real treat for

me."

As a youngster, Brewer, now 34, began by studying woodwinds. In high school, sparked by the sounds of Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and Seattle's grunge bands, he also played guitar. "I fell in love with rock 'n' roll, like most teenage boys do.

"When I got to college, I fell in love with jazz guitar and never looked back. Jazz opened up a whole other world for me.

"It was the depth and the breadth of jazz," Brewer explained. "Jazz is an art form that can never be mastered. There is such a limitlessness to it.

"When you're playing rock, funk or R&B, they're sort of groove-driven and, while you can progress them in certain ways and make them more creative, more interesting, they ultimately have kind of a ceiling. Jazz, stylistically and harmonically, has such an endless amount to be learned that every day is a new adventure."

After college, Brewer studied with guitar greats Charlie Hunter and Duck Baker. Brewer was drawn to finger-style playing. "I realized that I could play with a pick and still do occasionally, when I'm working with other people, but that finger-style really was more of my voice. It just felt more natural to me. I definitely felt a deeper connection with the instrument, playing in that style."

He continues to learn. In addition to his own concert dates and session work, Brewer offers private guitar lessons.

"I find that, when I teach students jazz, every day I'm taken on new and different paths. It's not quite the same for classical or rock, where you sort of stay within certain parameters and try to gain mastery within those parameters. Jazz is just wide open.

"I still actively seek out other great guitar players who I look up to and try to study them. There's always an active learning process going on."

Seeing artists like Kenny Burrell or Pat Metheny perform live has a dramatic effect on Brewer.

"You can gain a different sort of appreciation for their phrasing, how they're moving around the neck or how they're shaping certain chords. That all adds to the learning process."

With four albums already released on his own label, Brewer is working on another CD of standards and one that fuses jazz and hard rock.

Of his still growing musical career, Brewer said, "This is something that I would do for free, because I love it so much. The fact that I get to do it for a living is so amazing to me. I try to appreciate it on a daily basis and never take it for granted.

"There's not a lot of people who have found their passion, let alone get to make an income from that passion. So for me, that's a phenomenal thing."

E-mail Paul Freeman at romper333@comcast.net.

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