

# LET'S ROLL

## *Dealing With Prodigies (“Mental Health is Number 1”), & The All-Europe Jam*

Pete Wernick

Ah youth! I still remember my years as a teenaged musician and how much excitement and energy I had for learning and playing bluegrass. Fifty years later, I love to be around kids in that state of mind. *Kids today have it better than we had it, I tell you!*

Out on the bluegrass festival circuit each year, I get to witness the latest bloom of talent. Lately it seems younger and younger kids are getting into the music and excelling. Seeing little kids deep into music is a big treat for everybody.

Twenty years ago, in 1993, I had fun assembling some talented 12-year-olds into the IBMA Youth Bluegrass All-Stars—Thile, Cleveland, Kilby and Williams. In two whirlwind days in Owensboro, KY they won many hearts, showing us that the next century would be well-supplied with great bluegrass musicians. Ever since, I've been introduced to many promising youngsters, sometimes getting to work with them and know their families a bit.

Being a prodigy must be fun, but it's not all easy, especially on the parents. It takes extra work, for sure. And – if your other kids happen not to be prodigies, it's a balancing act requiring careful family decisions.

I've seen parents of prodigies in many roles, from press agent to accompanist, chauffeur, and disciplinarian. I tend to shy away from press-agency parents but enjoy the more laid back ones, and enjoy discussing the challenges they face.

Here are two kids who got to meet at my recent Merlefest Jam Camp... Micah and Liam, unusually musical at ages 9 and 10. Their love for music and their skills are right from the heart. They seem to take their talents in stride and have fun with them. Liam makes money busking and at contests, but doesn't let it go to his head. He saves it for things like jam camp. Both started singing at my camp, and they sound great. I was glad they met each other. Nine and 10 year old boys are a breed apart!

At a recent camp and festival I also met a wonderful 11 year-old musician and his mom. I got just the slightest vibe that he was a bit untrained as a team player, and more contest-oriented, but he was quite an advanced musician, for any age. After the camp I was on an email list receiving a greeting and link to a YouTube of the son playing onstage with a Famous Acoustic Act.

*I wrote back:*

He sounds great, and his bearing as he plays is interesting, as he seems swept up in the music, no need to look at his instrument. Both are signs of an unusual talent.

I really enjoyed my time with him at the camp and I hope you pass that on to him. He responded well to my direction, and was always a pleasure to have around. Some adults are just not “kid-friendly”, especially when on vacation, but it seemed to all work out just fine for everyone.

I wanted to mention that, while your son is exceptionally talented, at the camp I didn't relate to him on that level, as Famous Musician did on the big festival stage. In jam camp he was one of the students, of equal importance. The goals for him were: jam, have fun, learn, interact—and he did all the above just fine. When I suggested he control his volume better on backup, he caught right on. The take-away I was hoping for: *Variations in volume are important, and the best musicians control it with skill and sensitivity.*

The best thing musically for your son now is to interact with as many musicians as possible and begin a bunch of lifelong friendships. Those will be very rich indeed, as I'm sure they already are. His music will grow out of those. Great musicians will reach out to help him. He's very fortunate that way. You are doing a great job facilitating his being in those situations.

As a parent of an exceptional kid, I'm sure you realize there are extra responsibilities. Your son will get some exceptional treatment from others and not all of it will be a positive thing, though it's all positively intended. Sometimes he'll get treated better than his siblings or even you do. The way FM treated him on stage, for instance, could easily go to anyone's head, and so here now is the mantra I offer all parents of exceptionally talented kids:

*Mental Health Is Number One.*

(Not even physical health is more important, if you think about it.) Life presents many chances for some people to think they are more important or special than other people. It's encouraged and it can be rampant. Some of the most out-of-whack it can get happens with prodigies, when the talent-to-age ratio is at a max. Natural amazement and even glee.... true, we all thrive on appreciation/attention and he should enjoy that he can do something that people like and value. But keep the lid on, make sure he learns to think of the other. Sharing the spotlight is good, as well as being in purely support roles.

Then there are the ups and downs of the “biz”, especially the inevitable change when a kid stops looking like a little kid. So at age 13 or 14, adjustment to being less *sensational* is necessary, for the kid, and for the rest of the family even. It's just the way of the world, something to cope with. It can be done with humility and humor. Like when 10-year old Liam rolled his eyes and mentioned “the cute factor”. We know that child stars in general can be pretty low-achievers when it comes to adult mental health. Let's take care of our bluegrass prodigies! So to all “prodigy-ophiles”, let's be encouraging and facilitating, but not adulating. As much as anything, we need to help kids learn good values. They deserve it, regardless of whether they're a future superstar.



*Micah, Liam and their instrument transport system.*

### **The first All-Europe Bluegrass Jam Camp, Prague, March 2013**

I'll admit to a bit of trepidation about this camp...though it's hard to worry too much about whether people will have a good time playing music all weekend. But this camp was a little different...

*Would the hotel be suitable for the camp?* On the in-English

page of their web site, here's an exact quote: "**Our motto hotel is: World piles from many details and we will look after , to every detail your stay was perfect.**" English is not readily spoken or understood in the Czech Republic. Communications both before and during the camp were slow and uncertain.



*The first Europe-wide Jam Camp.*

It worked out fine. The hotel was homey and clean, the staff friendly, and the beds comfortable. Not much time was spent in the rooms!

*Would language problems slow the teaching, learning, and jamming to a crawl?* No...thank goodness. Twenty-four of us, from seven countries (Czech Republic, Germany, France, England, Italy, Denmark, U.S.A.) had two common languages—bluegrass and English. I made a point to speak slowly, with ample pauses, and as simple and concisely as I could. Whenever I asked, they all said they understood me. Yay!... Though it had to help to have two Czech assistants (Petr and Peter) to work with the Czech students.

*What about people singing in a language foreign to them?* I find it interesting that in Europe it's often assumed that bluegrass must be sung in English. Even Radim from Prague, who had difficulty speaking English, said he practiced *Mountain Dew* for weeks before the camp—and sang all five thickly-accented verses quite fluently while playing bass. When asked if he'd like the words on a music stand he said that would only confuse him. He got big kudos from me and a Jam Hero badge!

Claude from France had been practicing with Dan Huckabee's harmony singing instruction, and could sing the tenor part of *I Don't Want Your Rambling Letters*. I supplied the melody, and we had

international lonesome harmony.

This camp gave me a chance to certify two new Wernick Method teachers, Joff Lawson from Bristol, England, and Peter Ruby from Prague. Joff was asked to offer a jam class at a festival in Tamworth, England, and so the first Wernick Method British Festival Jam Class is happening

this month!

We got to take over the hotel's ballroom Sunday afternoon after the dog show people left. The jam groups—The Train Wrecks, Room 35, and Le Sac En Plastique featuring Mr. Chris Kealy, Europe's First Jam Hero—did themselves proud.

Some student comments:

*"This is such a great atmosphere. I haven't been around so many great players in one place ever. I enjoyed every minute and I don't think I stopped grinning the whole weekend."*

*"I learned a lot about bluegrass at other workshops, but at the jam camp I actually played it in earnest. I even managed to take solos for the first time."*

*"It was a nice an interesting week, with good music and nice people, and of course*

*enough beer."*

My thanks to Tomas Kral, proprietor of the Hotel Svornost, who provided many of the photos in this report, and commented on his web site:

*Čtyři dny se u nás hrálo na banjo a jiné strunné nástroje jako o život .Byli u nás na návštěvě bajisti z celé Evropy. Hru na Banjo je učil*

Dr. Banjo mistr Petr Wernick Four days with us playing the banjo and other stringed instruments like hell. Were here visiting banjo player from across Europe. Game Banjo taught by Dr. Banjo Champion Peter Wernick.

*For info about Jam Camps and Classes, go to [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)*

