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### School Rocks! ;

## As Arts Education Funds Dip, Pop Stars Make Sure the Beat Goes On

**BYLINE:** Melinda Newman; Special to The Washington Post**SECTION:** STYLE; Pg. N01**LENGTH:** 1716 words**DATELINE:** LOS ANGELES

Four years ago, Maya Ramos couldn't find middle C on a keyboard. Now she's finding her way to first place in international piano competitions.

In a tiny rehearsal studio in a storefront music **school**, the slender 11-year-old bends over an upright piano and lovingly tucks into Manuel Ponce's "Scherzino Mexicano," her wrists high, her fingers caressing the keys lightly, then heavier as the tone of the piece shifts. It's among the works she will perform in at a recital in Mexico City this fall.

Taking piano lessons wasn't her idea, she says, but her mother insisted and managed to find a place that would nurture Maya's interest and talent: the Silverlake Conservatory of Music on the city's east side. It was co-founded by a **rock** musician known more for his onstage antics than his appreciation of classical composers. That would be Flea, the frequently shirtless, frenetic bassist for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. He's one of a handful of **pop stars**, including soul singer Macy Gray and hip-hop's Black Eyed Peas, who have established nonprofit music **schools** for children. The artists initially bankrolled the projects and now rely primarily on donations and fundraisers to subsidize operations.

Such **schools** help fill a void left by deep state and federal budget cuts that have severely diminished **arts** programs in public **schools**. Maya, for example, cannot take piano at her charter public **school**; the only music electives are for violin and cello. Other students at Silverlake talk about having no music

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programs at their **schools** at all.

Flea (born Michael Balzary) launched Silverlake in 2001, in part because of such cutbacks. He says the music program at Los Angeles's Fairfax High **School** was his salvation in the late 1970s. "I was a troubled kid. I was on the street. I was doing drugs. I was breaking into people's houses. I was bad news," he recalled in an interview.

"Having music in **school** was the one thing that I really believed in. [It] gave me a focus, a structure and consistency." He took full advantage of a menu of offerings including orchestra, jazz and marching band, choir and musical productions.

After sitting by chance beside Fairfax's music teacher at a Knicks game in New York several years ago, the rocker decided to revisit his alma mater -- and found its music program decimated by budget cuts: "Everything was gone. I couldn't believe it," he says. "When I went, you could pick any instrument. You want to play in an orchestra? No problem. When I went back, it was a volunteer teacher, a couple of acoustic guitars. It was this shell of this thing that was still alive while I was there."

Flea says he put up "a few hundred thousand dollars" to open the Silverlake Conservatory with high **school** friend-turned-music teacher Keith Barry, who is the **school's** dean.

On a busy afternoon last week, students lugged their instruments, sometimes in music cases as tall as they are, into the lobby and sat under photos of Bob Dylan, Louis Armstrong, John Lennon and Paul McCartney. The sounds of piano, trumpet and guitar wafted from the six rehearsal rooms. The **school** has swelled to 25 part-time teachers tutoring 700 students (ages 4 and up), seven days a week. When his schedule permits, Flea teaches bass and trumpet.

### Cut Off

The cuts Flea witnessed began more than 25 years ago. Although there has been some improvement -- most notably in 2006, California's legislature agreed to a \$500 million one-time allocation and \$105 million in ongoing funding to restore **arts education** in the state's public **schools** -- slashing still occurs.

"Today, the first thing to go when there's a budget issue is the **arts** program," says Neil Portnow, president of the National Academy of Recording **Arts** and Sciences. NARAS's Grammy Foundation provides grants to more than 20 public **schools** annually to help **fund** music instruction. (Portnow himself is an alumnus of a musician-run program: he attended late trumpeter Maynard Ferguson's summer jazz camp in the 1960s.)

"It's probably more of a cultural issue than anything," he says. "For some reason, over the years the leadership that makes the decisions has failed to recognize how critical **arts** are" in an overall educational and humanities program.

Additionally, **arts** cuts have been an

unintended consequence of President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The initiative sets standards of accountability in math and reading, leading to criticisms of **schools'** "teaching to the test" in those subjects instead of

providing a well-rounded humanities curriculum.

The **arts** cuts are "not something that is intended by the accountability measures that were put in place by No Child Left Behind for math and reading," says Doug Herbert, a special assistant in the Department of **Education's** office of innovation and improvement. **Arts** courses are included in the act's list of 10 core academic subjects, but, he says, "I think hardly anybody would disagree with the idea that if you can't read by third grade, you're probably not going to do well in music and visual **arts** and dance and theater either."

Some cuts continue despite data showing a direct correlation between music study and increased SAT scores. Students with four or more years of music and **arts education** scored 93 points higher on their SATs than students who had half a year or less, according to statistics compiled by the College Board.

**Pop stars** aren't the only ones stepping up to help. More than \$4 million worth of new and refurbished musical instruments have been donated to **school** programs and students by the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation in Sherman Oaks, Calif. -- started in 1996 by the late composer Michael Kamen, who wrote the music for the movie of the same name. And VH1's Save the Music Foundation, a 10-year-old nonprofit organization, says it has restored musical instrument programs in more than 1,400 elementary and middle **schools**.

Paul Cothran, Save the Music's executive director, praises the efforts of Flea and other performers, but doesn't believe their generosity absolves public **schools** of their responsibility to provide **arts education**.

"As recently as two years ago, I was reading reports that there were still about 30 million students that lacked access to music programs. That's K through 12. There's still a lot of work to be done," he says.

### **Modern Music**

If the Silverlake Conservatory of Music leans toward the traditional, the Black Eyed Peas' efforts are geared to the digital age. The Peapod Music & **Arts** Academy was launched in January with the debut of a \$400,000 studio donated by the Peas to a foster kids and at-risk youth group at the Watts/Willowbrook Boys & Girls Club. But there are no violin or flute lessons at this **school**: The curriculum gives students access to Pro Tools digital audio workstations, video editing bays, cameras and more.

"We were, like, let's give them the same equipment we use to make our music, the same editing tools that we use and the same cameras we use to make our videos," says William Adams, better known as Will.I.Am, the Peas' rapper, producer and multi-instrumentalist.

Macy Gray's M.Gray Music Academy combines the old and new, offering after-**school** and weekend classes in disciplines ranging from jazz guitar and musical composition to "beginning turntable." Classes are offered in eight-week sessions at Gray's North Hollywood studio. The Peapod Academy classes are free, while both the M.Gray Music Academy and Silverlake Conservatory charge for lessons, but offer scholarships to eligible students. Silverlake managing director Jennifer Rey says approximately 100 students are on scholarship (that includes free instruments) and that number will increase to 150 next year.

The oldest of the **schools** is the Tupac Amaru Shakur Center for the **Arts** in

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Stone Mountain, Ga., founded in 1997 by the slain rapper's mother, Afeni Shakur. The program started as a summer performing **arts** day camp for 25 middle **school** and high **school** students, who met in donated space at high **schools** and colleges. The center, which offers training in singing, acting, dancing, set design and poetry, now has its own facility on 11 acres and has expanded to a year-round after-**school** curriculum. Much of the teaching centers on Tupac's music and poetry. Last year Shakur launched a foundation in her son's name and is now attempting to raise \$4 million to build a community performing **arts** facility. "Tupac pursued the performing **arts** as an alternative to life on the streets," Shakur said in a statement to The Post. "Forming the foundation and the center were my ways of guaranteeing that Tupac would be remembered as the man he really was, not as the character he often took on in his music."

As a 17-year-old student and mother, Celina Nixon participated in the Shakur Center's 2000 summer camp. Now 24, she is the center's artistic director and says the skills she gained at camp extended far beyond the artistic: "I learned it wasn't just about performance and who's a big **star** . . . Being a teenage mother, it gave me other things I could use," including knowledge about careers and finances.

That mirrors the mission the Black Eyed Peas have set for their academy -- to teach life lessons, not just music ones. They also aim to close the digital divide that exists between high-income and lower-income computer users. "The same tools that the people have in Beverly Hills are accessible to the people in the 'hood, but the people in the 'hood don't have the knowledge that they can do that," says Will.I.Am. "The new Steven Spielberg could live in Watts, but they don't know they can compete because there's not the technology in their **schools**."

The Peas' ambitious plan includes unveiling two more academies over the next two years (2008's will be in the East L.A. projects where Will.I.Am grew up) and then hatching up to four new Peapod **schools** a year via the Boys & Girls Clubs in inner cities throughout the United States and abroad, according to Will.I.Am.

Flea isn't talking yet about a nationwide program but believes all children deserve the chance to study music as he did. "Even a moderately simple understanding of music leads to a much richer life," he says. The famed bassist is too modest to declare that the Silverlake Conservatory will be his legacy, but is **sure** of one thing: "It's the best idea I ever had."

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**GRAPHIC:** IMAGE; By Jonathan Alcorn For The Washington Post; Abigail Smith, 6, gets an earful from the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Flea, who founded L.A.'s Silverlake Conservatory of Music to fill a void left by public **school** cutbacks. IMAGE; By Jonathan Alcorn For The Washington Post; Wills Guggenheim, 7, drums home a point at Silverlake Conservatory of Music. The **school's** founder, Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea, says a music **education** "gave me a focus, a structure and consistency" when growing up. IMAGE; By Albert Watson

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