

ONE OF A KIND ~

Steve "Oz" Osburn and his Music Environment Inspire Musicians of All Ages



Photo by Steven Balogh

**"My hope is to create a space parents and kids can interact in, with little knowledge of music, and teach each other with hands-on music."
~ Steve Osburn**

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Steve "Oz" Osburn and his Music Environment Inspire Musicians of All Ages

By Karen Foulke Larson

Who is Steve "Oz" Osburn? As a musician, music teacher for all ages, business owner, and performer, people know him for different reasons. There are the parents who witness his amazing talent for teaching music and helping their children explore instruments. Other adults know him as a wonderful teacher for their age group and as a talented musician and performer. He has a full calendar that often keeps him working seven days a week.

On Tuesdays, you can find him entertaining kids with his music in the youth department at the downtown branch of the Ann Arbor Library, as part of the popular story time. Thursday nights he leads group guitar lessons. Saturdays he gives lessons, organizes "Strum and Drum Family Fun" and performs for an occasional wedding. Sundays are usually the day he hosts birthday parties in the Oz's Music Environment. Then, of course, there are the individual and group lessons that he gives Monday-Saturday.

Steve has been part of the Ann Arbor community for over thirty years. A music environment for exploring instruments has always been part of Steve's teaching space. For almost two decades, Oz's Music Environment has been located on Packard. Passers by will notice two storefronts – one for Oz's Music Store and one for the Music Environment. The Music Store is managed by Steve's wife, Leslie Zager, and provides repairs and rentals and buys, sells and trades instruments. Steve calls it, "The quintessential ma and pa shop with a variety of services that go beyond sales." Oz's Music Environment is filled with instruments, and includes a stage for performances and other events. In addition to Steve, there are many talented musicians who give lessons in that location.



Steve Osburn plays the Chapman Stick at the first national stick festival, which he helped organize in Ann Arbor in 2006. Musicians and students agree that Osburn has a wonderfully unique style on this instrument with 12 strings that is a cross between a guitar, a bass and a keyboard.

Early in his career, Steve taught at the Ann Arbor Montessori Center and still includes many Montessori practices in his current teaching, including prepared environments for children, sensorial development, and hands on learning experiences.

Steve has also been inspired by the Suzuki Method. He believes in kids not only imitating but creating music. In the Music Environment students, teachers and parents take turns leading and following.

The Music Environment

After eight years as a partner in the Crescent Music repair shop and rehearsal space, Steve started Oz's Music in 1990. The third and current location for Oz's Music is on Packard. Seeing a child in the Music Environment is like watching a kid survey all of the treasures in a candy store. Their eyes are wide; they are looking over all of the possibilities; but in the case of the music environment, they are encouraged to try all of the different instruments. Parents are often surprised that Steve is so willing to let their young children try any instrument.

Freshly painted walls display the artwork of local artists, but the instruments are the stars of the space. The drum set is like a big magnet for kids, inviting them to come make some noise. Kids get excited about singing into the microphones and trying the variety of drums.

There are also two smaller rooms in the upstairs portion of the Music Environment. One room has the instrument choices offered by the Ann Arbor Public Schools for fifth graders. The other room, known as the "back room," is a wonderful space where students and siblings can explore a wall of guitars and violins, boom whackers, xylophones, and a variety of other unique instruments before and after lessons.

Exploring Music

Nine-year-old Lute Smith was only two when he started taking lessons from Steve. His mom, Eileen Storer Smith, recalls, "I heard he worked well with all age levels, and provided more than learning instruction but a 'learning environment' in which children could learn and grow. Steve, indeed, provides a learning environment filled with instruments of all kinds in which children are free to explore and experiment."

Both of Karen Vetor's sons (ages 8 and 5) love going to the music environment for lessons with Steve. She says, "Steve has a wonderful way of getting children excited about music because of his flexibility in creating special musical opportunities for children to explore reading music, rhythm through games, a variety of instruments, and how to play music together."

Nicky Northrop credits Steve for her daughter Ashley's ability to play so many instruments. Ashley started learning acoustic guitar, then learned electric guitar, and continued learning new instruments. Nicky says, "If Ashley had started taking lessons somewhere else she might have just played acoustic guitar. We might not have known what she could do."

That appreciation of exploration is also true for the Brownlee family. Aerin Brownlee says her son, Gram, started taking percussion lessons and discovered how much he enjoys piano. In addition, Brownlee says that she appreciates that Steve recognizes the student's interest at the moment and doesn't force him to follow his own schedule.

"I don't want to be just the teacher who tells kids what to do. I want to be a teacher who helps kids make constructive decisions towards learning."

~ Steve Osburn

Teaching Guitar

Steve might be better known for his teaching abilities with kids, but he has students of all ages. Steve Balogh is one of Steve's adult students. He is usually at Oz's every Thursday night for the group guitar lessons. Balogh

Photo by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics

Leslie Zager and husband, Steve Osburn, are the creative forces behind Oz's Music. Besides managing the store, Leslie contributes her talents to summer art camps and drop in art sessions for pre-schoolers. Their daughter, Rose, is a high school student.

Early Influences

Growing up in Tecumseh, Michigan, music was always a part of Steve's life. He has early memories of sitting around the organ with his grandpa, mom and brothers singing hymns. He was only five-years-old when he campaigned to be the first child in the church choir. Soon he was singing harmonies with the grown-ups in the choir, which encouraged other children to join.

As a teenager, Steve attended summer sessions at Interlochen Center for the Arts and studied classical guitar at Eastern Michigan University. He took a job working in a music store, which helped him realize how much he enjoyed teaching. Around the same time, Steve visited his nephew's Montessori school to find out what his nephew was learning. There he first encountered Sister Anthonita Porta, a teacher who was nationally known for her role in Montessori education and whose ideas would eventually greatly influence his teaching. Sister Anthonita helped start The New England Montessori Teacher Training Center where Steve studied years later.

says, "I've never seen a store like this, with a few teachers that are actually known professionals and an actual stage where performances are held, too. There's really no other store I've seen in Michigan where students can actually be taught in a performance-based environment."

Steve is unassuming and very humble. He never takes credit for anyone else's success, yet he is clearly excited by his former students' accomplishments. Aaron Wolf, Tyler Duncan, and Randy Napoleon all started exploring music with Steve and went on to become professional musicians. Aaron is also a teacher himself.

At the age of eight, Aaron started taking music lessons from Steve. He says, "Steve is a very talented classical guitarist and creative musician. He encouraged me to compose and explore. He also encouraged me to record my first CDs and to get into teaching."

Tyler, a member of *My Dear Disco*, a nationally known band, started taking lessons from Steve when he was nine-years-old. He says, "Steve was a crucial part of my musical upbringing. He encouraged me to experiment, create, and simply have fun with music, which are the most important musical elements of all. Creating that association at such a young age was the reason I eventually pursued it (a music career) full-time."

Steve Balogh, an adult student at Oz's, says, "I've never seen a store like this, with a few teachers that are actually known professionals and an actual stage where performances are held, too. There's really no other store I've seen in Michigan where students can actually be taught in a performance-based environment."

Randy Napoleon is an internationally acclaimed jazz guitarist, arranger and composer who performs with the Freddy Cole Quartet as well as with the Randy Napoleon Trio. As a teenager, Randy took his first guitar lessons from Steve Osburn. Randy says, "He was the ideal person to introduce me



Photo by Steven Balogh

Steve Osburn performing at the Crazy Wisdom Tea Room.

to the instrument because his interests and knowledge base are wide open. Whatever I wanted to explore, Steve was into it and pointed me in the right direction. Anything I asked about, he seemed to be able to point me in the right direction." Napoleon also appreciates Steve's support. He says, "The other thing that struck me was that he cared. He was excited when I learned something, and he was always encouraging."

Saturdays at Oz's

That exploration and encouragement are part of the Music Environment. Every Saturday at 3:00, Steve works his musical magic for the "Strum and Drum Family Fun" event for kids. He leads a drum circle on the first Saturday of each month, and on the other Saturdays children explore a variety of instruments.

Steve recalls a recent Saturday when six kids showed up, ranging in age from 3 to 5. He happily shares a story about how the kids composed, conducted, and performed simple rhythms while their parents listened. Steve says, "The parents' reaction was, 'Wow!' They knew their kids were capable, but they didn't realize how much they could do."

Even the smallest of children have big wishes. Kids get excited by the variety of instruments and ask to try their favorites. Steve recalls a three-year-old who chose to play trumpet for three weeks straight and then started learning trumpet. Steve says, "I don't want to be just the teacher who tells kids what to do. I want to be a teacher who helps kids make constructive decisions towards learning."

The first Saturday of each month, Oz's Music also hosts an open stage. Kids don't need to be students at Oz's in order to perform. It is a supportive environment for young musicians and singers.

What's Next?

After more than thirty years of teaching, Oz still gets excited about music and learning. Recently he has been creating music games for a new exploratory space in the basement of the Music Environment. He says, "My hope is to create a space parents and kids can interact in, with little knowledge of music, and teach each other with hands-on music." He is also working on funding for a CD of his own music.

Recently Oz's Music started offering Interactive Metronome (IM) sessions. IM is a research-based therapy that has shown benefits for improving focus and concentration. The research shows benefits for people diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, athletes, and people recovering from strokes. Steve is excited about this new opportunity, which is offered once a month at the Music Environment.

"Talented, dedicated, amazing, wonderful, fun"...those are just a few of the words parents and students use to describe Steve Osburn and his Music Environment. As a professional musician, Randy Napoleon has traveled all over the world, and even he thinks, "Steve is one of a kind."

Learn more about Oz's Music by visiting: ozsmusic.com. The web site includes a Google calendar with each month's events and the store's promotions. Set up a lesson time with Steve Osburn: 734-476-5153 or contact Oz's Music for more information by calling 734-662-8283 or e-mailing ozmusic@ozmusic.com.

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Know Obstacles

A Band of Young People with Varying Special Needs

Musician and teacher Steve “Oz” Osburn believes that music is for everyone. His teaching philosophy allows children of all ages and adults to experience and explore music, and his Music Environment provides the instruments and the performance space.

David Ziff was only five-years-old when his older sister Vera first took him to Oz’s Music Environment. Oz remembers how David immediately felt at home. After several years of lessons, David, who is autistic, became the first band member in **Know Obstacles**, a band of young people with varying special needs. Steve leads the band, and together they write songs, perform, and record. David’s dad, Bob Ziff, says the band is, “Mainly about them enjoying playing together and accomplishing something.”

The band has a busy calendar, with many performances. Seeing how much they enjoy music makes it even more fun to watch them. Nicky Northrop, mom and stepmom to two of the band members, says that although the band members tend to be introverted, they have a “stage presence” when they perform. Nicky says being part of the band allows them to work with other people and be part of a team, and she believes those skills will benefit them in other areas of their lives.

The parents praise Steve for his patience and his ability to bring out the best in each person. “Steve is an incredible person. He has an extreme amount of patience and an incredible amount of dedication,” says Bob. Nicky says, “He has worked wonders with everyone who he comes in contact with.”

Dylan Northrop, age 18, has spent nine years as a drummer for **Know Obstacles**. He likes writing new tunes and covering old ones. Dylan “enjoys playing gigs.” He says, “I am glad that I am part of the band because I can get better at playing my instrument.”

Ashley Brunk, age 19, sings, plays guitar and piano. Her perfect pitch and attention to detail are definite assets. She says, “I am glad I am in the band because I have been able to improve my musical techniques. I’ve always wanted to be part of a band plus... you make friends along the way.”

The admiration and respect the band members and their parents have for Steve is clear. Dylan says, “Steve is our leader. He teaches different musical techniques. Steve is very gifted.” Ashley says, “Steve is very, very multi-talented. He is a respected and gifted musician.”

“Steve is one of their heroes,” says Dave Northrop (Dylan’s dad and Ashley’s stepdad). And he adds, “He’s one of my heroes too. What he does is absolutely amazing!”

--- Karen Larson

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Photo provided by the Northrop family.

Drummer Dylan Northrop performs with Know Obstacles at one of their 2010 summer concerts.



Photo by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics

Know Obstacles (band members left to right: David Ziff, Steve Osburn, Lauren White, Brandon Walker, Dylan Northrop, Ashley Brunk) poses outside of their rehearsal space at Oz’s Music Environment.

Steve “Oz” Osburn believes that music is for everyone.



Photo provided by the Northrop family.

Founding member, David Ziff, performs with Know Obstacles at the 2010 Buddy Walk.



(At left) Two-year-old Teddy Campbell has fun drumming at Oz's Strum Drum and Family Fun event

(Below) Lily Rearick enjoys playing music during her older brother Liam's lesson at Oz's Music Environment;

(At right) Joaquin Moore, age 4, listens intently as part of the Saturday drum circle at Oz's Music. Each student gets a chance to create and repeat patterns.



Eight-year-old Lute Smith was only two when he started taking lessons from Steve. His mom, Eileen Storer Smith, recalls, "I heard he worked well with all age levels, and provided more than learning instruction but a 'learning environment' in which children could learn and grow.

(photos on this page by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics)



Seeing a child in Oz's Music Environment is like watching a kid survey all of the treasures in a candy store... Parents are often surprised that Steve is so willing to let their young children try any instrument.... students and siblings can explore a wall of guitars and violins, boom whackers, xylophones, and a variety of other unique instruments before and after lessons.

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Happiness is Making Music

By Karen Vektor

Music is the heartbeat for many, it awakens something inside. It has for my children.

My sons and I first experienced Steve Osburn's talent during a concert at Ann Arbor Learning Community last winter. My older son, Austin, watched with his class, and my younger son, Colin, and I were part of the audience. Steve brought the room alive as he played musical rhythms and asked everyone to clap back. He demonstrated the Chapman Stick (a combination guitar, bass and keyboard), drums, and guitar and ended the program by asking the entire group to clap or move to the music. Both Austin and Colin came away excited about the event! They wanted more!

Over spring break last year, Austin attended a special field trip at Oz's Music Environment with a few friends from school. He had never played an instrument before and was thrilled to end the day with a jam session playing the electric guitar! Austin loved it so much he signed up for a week-long summer music camp. Steve has a wonderful way of getting the children excited about music through his great rhythm games, his fun games to introduce reading music, his encouragement to explore any instrument, and through playing music together.

Colin attended a shorter version of summer music camp with his preschool friends. He came home singing every song they learned. On the last day, Steve offered the preschoolers the chance to try any instrument they wanted, and Colin chose the drums. The entire experience made a lasting impression. Colin even made up his own song about Oz's music called, *The Osburn Song*.

My sons have continued to take lessons at Oz's Music Environment. The kids in the summer camp session return for a group lesson every other week. As Austin says, "I love it. I love dancing, playing instruments, and singing songs." In the eyes of an 8-year-old, what wouldn't be better than to feel the accomplishment of having a band, being able to explore any instrument you want, and to have the opportunity to sing into a microphone, and express yourself musically?

Both boys also take a group guitar class. They both tell me that guitar class is one of their favorite parts of their week.

Music is a significant part of their world. It makes them happy. I appreciate the incredible gift that Steve Osburn has for inspiring kids to enjoy music.

Austin Vektor says, "I love it. I love dancing, playing instruments, and singing songs." In the eyes of an 8-year-old, what wouldn't be better than to feel the accomplishment of having a band, being able to explore any instrument you want, and to have the opportunity to sing into a microphone, and express yourself musically?



The Vektor family, Karen with sons Austin (left) and Colin, loves spending time at Oz's. Guitar classes at Oz's are a highlight of their week.

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Photo by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics

Every Thursday Steve Osburn hosts a "drop-in" group guitar session at 7:30 p.m. followed by optional performance time.

Every Saturday at 3:00, Steve works his musical magic for the "Strum and Drum Family Fun" event for kids. He leads a drum circle on the first Saturday of each month, and on the other Saturdays children explore a variety of instruments.



Photo by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics

Aiyan Lanker performs at open stage, an event held on the first Saturday of each month. Oz's open stage provides a supportive environment for young musicians and singers, and they don't have to take lessons at Oz's in order to participate in this free event. Sometimes even kids who hadn't planned on performing are inspired to sing or play an instrument. They have the choice to have the added security of having Steve accompany them.



Photos by Donald Adiska, Ovation Photographics

Many students "form their own band" and meet for weekly or biweekly jam sessions. Front Row (Left to Right): Steve Osburn, Colin and Austin Vektor; Second Row (Left to Right): Liam Rearick and Alaina Heetderks; Back Row: Sarah Larson on the drums.

In Oz's Music Environment, students and teachers and parents take turns leading and following.