

Features



HIGH WITHOUT A HANGOVER: The 180 young fans last Saturday didn't allow the safety and security of YRock to get in the way of a great time as (far right) EMP earned their "best on-stage personality" award. Organisers say YRock has become a cool place to hang out.

'The kids are alright'

Getting away from pop music's sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, YRock provides a safe showcase for young musical talent. Report and photos by *Steve Cray*

THE GUITARIST LIFTS ONE foot on to the speaker cabinet in front of him, points his instrument skywards, grimaces and plays yet another blistering riff to an audience already mesmerised by a demonstration of raw power.

Other musicians nudge their way to the front of the crowd, one muttering an almost inaudible "awesome" under his breath.

Looking every inch a rock hero, Vincent Yu, 17, has been playing for barely 10 months. Amazingly, he isn't even the regular guitarist with his band, Dying Process. "I usually play bass," he said modestly. "Our guitarist is away at Brown University in the US so I've had to switch. He plays so much better than me. I messed up a few times." Listening to his performance last Saturday you would be forgiven for wondering what he was talking about.

With the regular guitarist out of town, the band was down to two, Eugene Tsang, 16, on vocals and drums.

Playing metal and hardcore rock, Dying Process was the last act in the last of a series of showcase events for youngsters called YRock at The Edge nightclub in Wyndham Street, Soho.

With children as young as nine taking part, some parents – nurtured in an age when the now almost saintly Beatles were considered the antichrist – thought Dying Process's thrash metal literally diabolical.

"We've had parents coming up and saying: 'How can you put the devil's music on the CD of the event?'" said YRock founder and chief executive Ricky Spinn. And that's an irony considering both Vincent and Eugene go to the International Christian School in Kowloon, and that Vincent has no intention of taking unholy musical orders. "I want to go to college and study history and then become a teacher," he said.

Not that Vincent was the only musician wowing peers and parents. James Campion, son of Hong

Kong drummer James Campion senior, showed he was more than just a chip off the old block. Playing to a backing track of *Those Who Cannot Speak* by metal band Shadows Fall, the Island School pupil played a drum solo that had to be heard to be believed.

"I think he played the gig of his life," YRock founder and managing director Belinda Howard said, to which musical director Cary Abrahams, with more than 30 years' professional experience, added: "I would take him on the road with my band in a heartbeat." No prizes for guessing what James wants to do when he leaves school.

YRock, which launched in February and held showcases at The Edge in April, May, June, September and October, as well as workshops at Musicland in Causeway Bay, is the culmination of Spinn's years of hosting youth events, ranging from Just Be TV to the Rockit Youth Programme. But he said YRock was the first to gain real credibility with parents, and that Ms Howard – marketing consultant, musician with the SAR Philharmonic and mother-of-four – had a lot to do with that success.

"She is a natural with the kids and parents. They listen to her. We went through a number of projects at different venues trying to get parental approval."

Describing YRock as "a kids' event with an adult section", Spinn said he had been aware of the importance of giving youngsters a creative outlet. "A young girl who had been playing in another programme I was running committed suicide in Discovery Bay during a period when we weren't running. Singing with the programme was her way of letting her anger and depression out. It made me realise how much this kind of thing was needed."

Ms Howard said parents had already thanked them for the impact on their children, adding that a no-re-entry policy had been put in place to ensure youngsters stayed



HIGH-OCTANE: Dying Process guitarist Vincent Yu plays another power riff to a mesmerised YRock audience.

safely inside and her husband Mike, a policeman formerly with the narcotics bureau, manned the door.

Not that safety and security detracts from the fun, as the 180 young fans testified. Many went along for the social occasion rather than a stage appearance and clearly enjoyed the vibe, as well as soft drinks and pizza. "They look forward to these events. YRock has become a cool place to hang out," Ms Howard said.

Although the management refrains from lecturing on drugs and lifestyle, a powerful awareness video, which shows a youth falling from the edge of a tall building after a group have been smoking dope, sends the message: "If you play on the edge of your life you could lose your balance."

Musical director Abrahams, who put Vincent Yu's performance into perspective by playing a virtuoso solo during the afternoon that showed what could be done with 30 years' experience but without a distortion safety net, spelled out the value of having professionals' life experience to call on. "In the old days there was always an aura of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll and over the years we've seen enough very talented people who have either ruined or lost their lives or affected other people's. I think what we're seeing now is goodness, cleanliness, focus and direction of thought."

He said there was a message for parents too. "I hope the parents don't take away the opportunity for them to play music. When I was younger, the parents of most of the people I performed with said OK, it's time for you to give up that music thing and get a real job and a life. Twenty five years later some are getting back into it and saying how they wished their parents hadn't stopped them because they could have included it in their lives."

Ms Howard said she hoped to find sponsors to help expand the programme next year to take in youngsters from local schools. Other plans included a possible showcase event at Cyberport. "We've done it on a shoestring this year to develop it and make it professional," she said. "Now we have to raise awareness with parents and build the YRock community."

Final judges of a youth event

must be the youngsters themselves, and there was nothing but praise for both the YRock concept and its organisation last weekend.

"It's good because there are no set winners so nobody is discouraged from playing. It's more creative," said Alden Beckett, 16, from Sha Tin College, guitarist with EMP, the band that won an award for "best on-stage personality".

Singer-songwriter Kathryn Price, 18, from Island School, who won a prize for "best original music" and is applying to UK universities to study pop music for her degree, said: "I think YRock is a really good place for young musicians to get the opportunity to play their own music style, which is great."

As original Britpop rockers The Who said back in 1979: "The kids are alright".

YRock is holding an awards celebration Christmas special at The Edge, 60 Wyndham Street, 6pm-9pm, December 21. Entry is \$65. Visit <http://www.yrock.com.hk> or e-mail info@yrock.com.hk

GETTING A BUZZ FROM THE CD

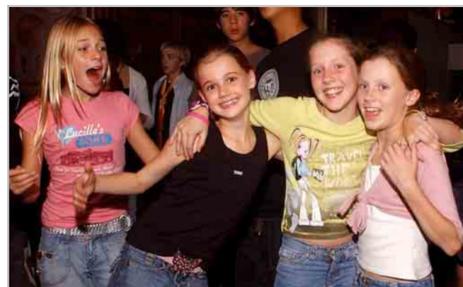
Although there wasn't an outright winner in last weekend's YRock final, there was an element of competition, with judges choosing the best 10 acts to be included on a YRock 2005 CD.

There were also three performance awards with the showcase being filmed for a DVD.

● The 10 acts on the CD are: Voodoo Child, Heather Lowe, Ghost Souljah, Sabrina Hinchliffe, James Campion, EMP, C Thru, Fiona Mackinnon, Kathryn Price and Dying Process.

● Special awards went to: James Campion (best performance), Kathryn Price (best original music) and EMP (best on-stage personality).

YRock founder and managing director Belinda Howard said the 10 artists would be promoted by Sound Buzz – a music download website serving Asia – and the CD was being mastered at City University. Proceeds from the sale of the CD and DVD would help develop YRock. Visit <http://www.sounbuzz.com> Steve Cray



TUNING IN: YRock music director Cary Abrahams (above left) with drummer James Campion who "played the gig of his life". Vincent Yu's guitar tells you where he's coming from and (far right) YRock founder and chief executive Ricky Spinn talks tracks with a novice DJ.

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South China Morning Post

Q&A

My daughter is taking her A-levels this year and wants to take a "gap year" before starting university. She is very keen to travel and is quite independent but I worry that this could damage her chances of getting to a good university. Should I try to talk her out of it?

Katherine Forestier, education editor, responds:

No, you shouldn't. There are huge benefits to be had from a gap year and universities, even in Hong Kong, now acknowledge this. However, you can help ensure that the year is well-spent. Get talking about the purpose, the options, and start planning. A gap year should involve much more than a teenager spending a blank cheque on travel and leisure.

You have nothing to fear about how universities will respond, though it is true that those in the UK are more used to catering for huge numbers of students taking gap years than those in Hong Kong and the US.

Henry Wai Wing-kun, registrar of the University of

Hong Kong, said HKU regarded a gap year as valuable broadening experience, particularly if students spent time engaged in community activities. It was also beneficial for students entering professional programmes such as teaching, medicine and social work to have had that extra life experience outside education, he said.

However, the university asks students to let it know of their intentions as soon as possible after receiving an offer so it can arrange to defer the place for a year.

Paul Morris, president of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, said the HKIEd was happy for students to defer entry without re-applying.

A spokesperson for the Joint University Programmes Admissions System said Form Seven students could delay their applications through JUPAS to subsequent years.

Universities may question your daughter on how she intends to spend the year and what she expects to gain.

Those who have made the most of gap years have not spent the time merely travelling and enjoying a year of freedom at their parents' expense. They have planned a

Questions can be sent to the education section of the South China Morning Post at 16/F Somerset House, Taikoo Place, 979 King's Road, Quarry Bay. E-mail: education@scmp.com or fax on 2811 1048

mix of experiences – voluntary work, adventure travel, work experience and gaining useful new skills. Some may be spent working, to help meet the cost of any adventure overseas. The idea should be that your daughter is more enriched by the experience, more mature and responsible, and better prepared for university and life. Some activities, from teaching in China to collecting data for a research project at home or overseas, could give students a head start for their chosen university course.

There is a huge range of organised gap activities to choose from, including some in Hong Kong and the mainland.

Check out www.gap-year.com and www.yearoutgroup.org, two websites on the numerous options for the year, including links to international organisations that cater for students looking to work, travel, volunteer or learn overseas.

Also view: www.worldlinkedu.com lists study and work experience options for overseas students in China.