

Los Angeles Times

UP FRONT: WITH THE KIDS



A BIGGER BANG: A bewigged Harry Wong plays the drums while Movies By Kids' Aaron Priceman videotapes him.



Photographs by MEL MELCON *Los Angeles Times*

BIRTHDAY BOY: "It was probably the funnest party I've ever been to," says 10-year-old Cooper Shepherd, standing. He chose to make a music video to the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Dani California"

It's like AFI with cake and pizza

Blind man's bluff? No way! Birthday parties now cater to the inner Spielberg.

By Chris Rubin,
Special to The Times

PEOPLE in Hollywood often are accused of acting like spoiled children. That may sting for some (eh, Lindsay?) but would only elicit an ennui-laden "duh" or, perhaps, "whatever" from Movies by Kids' participants who are, in fact, actual kids.

"Wouldn't it have been great," says Greg Kindseth, a professional film editor, "if they had a

film school for kids when we were younger?"

That was the proverbial klieg light going off over his head. He partnered with his brother John, a businessman who quickly saw the potential in this concept, and their childhood friend Aaron Priceman, an actor and one-time teacher who had served as an infomercial pitchman and audience warmup comic on a sitcom.

What began four years ago with 80 students enrolled in weekly classes at one school has since swelled to nearly 1,000 students per week in dozens of schools in Los Angeles Unified and other districts, in addition to filmmaking camps during school

vacations as well as birthday parties and other special events.

Ongoing classes in schools and community centers allow Priceman, the Kindseth brothers and their staff of instructors to delve into the technical details of movies. Birthday parties offer just a quick immersion, yielding either an animated short (cutout animation à la "South Park" or clay animation in the style of Wallace & Gromit) or a rock video.

That's how Cooper Shepherd came to make a rock video at his 10th

birthday party. He chose the Red Hot Chili Peppers' song "Dani California" and worked with Movies by Kids' Priceman to figure out how to shoot it. Sequences include Cooper playing electric guitar, flying like Superman and sliding up a banister. "It was probably the funnest party I've ever been to," Cooper says breathlessly.

For Cooper's father, John, a writer for television and film, having Movies by Kids come to the party was a perfect fit. "Cooper had already been to their camps, and he really



Photographs by MEL MELCON *Los Angeles Times*

ROCKIN': Austin Mensch and Cooper Shepherd perform for Aaron Priceman's camera. "Our goal is to make moviemaking for young people as hands-on as possible," Priceman says.

enjoys that stuff," John explains. "He's a big ham, so it's almost tailor-made for him."

John was impressed by the skill Priceman showed in handling Cooper and 11 other preteen boys. "They seemed to know that you have to keep kids moving," John says, "rather than having them sit around so they could be directorial. It was very shrewd letting them do what they want and then fixing it in the edit later."

John shares his son's enthusiasm for the event. "It was by far the best birthday party we ever had," he says. "I thought it might be more like my experiences [on film sets], with all the stops and starts — standing around, trying to not go insane. But they kept it going for two hours without ever losing the kids' attention."

Priceman brought a simple Sony digital video camera along with a few wardrobe items, assorted props and a blue screen for special effects. After brainstorming with Cooper, both before the party and once he had arrived, Priceman led the kids through two hours of shooting,

allowing breaks for pizza and, of course, birthday cake.

One week later, Cooper received the DVDs in the mail and had plans to distribute them, along with thank-you notes, to the guests at his party.

The partners behind Movies by Kids take their role seriously. Not only have several former students come back a few years later to work for them, but others have also entered their movies in film festivals and won.

And there's more to it than just re-creating the dance steps or mugging of an MTV star. "Kids don't even realize how much they're learning," Priceman says. "You have to use math and other cognitive skills when making these movies."

Future plans include an action-themed camp in the spring, complete with martial arts experts who will help the would-be filmmakers learn to choreograph action sequences and instruction in editing as the software improves and hardware prices drop.

"It's really the first time that kids have been able to make



FRAMER: Priceman kept it going for two hours without losing the kids' attention, "says an admiring parent."

Movies By Kids

Where: 18344 Oxnard St., Suite #101, Tarzana, CA 91356

Price: See class schedule. Parties begin at \$350 for groups of up to 15; cost varies based on party size, location and special effects.

Info: (818) 702-6000;
www.moviesbykids.com

Upcoming classes

- **Claymation Creations:** Movies by Kids studios, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dec. 18 to 22. \$325 tuition, plus \$25 lab fees.*

- **Rockin' Music Videos:** Movies By Kids Studios, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Jan. 2 to 5. \$260, plus \$25 lab fees.

- **Digital Filmmaking:** Agoura/Calabasas Community Center, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Jan 2 to 5. \$260, plus \$25 lab fees.

- **Digital Filmmaking:** Oak Hills Community Center, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Jan 2 to 5. \$260, plus \$25 lab fees.

* Classes are for ages 7 and older. Lab fees cover all costs related to editing, production, duplication and shipping of the DVD.

movies like this," Priceman says, attributing the breakthrough to new technologies.

"Our goal is to make moviemaking for young people as hands-on as possible," he says.

"We're changing Hollywood, one little filmmaker at a time."

weekend@latimes.com