

Bear Creek Elementary School teacher Lee Alexander, center, and his family band bring their take on folk music to center stage



The Family Band

Dad Lee Alexander, his daughters, uncle, and family friend turn up the volume on fun with music

Written by Tassie Hewitt | Select photography by Layla Zakaria

Emma Alexander's favorite band is the acapella pop group Pentatonix



Photo by Mabel Hill

The family performs at Cactus Music in Houston

"It's a family band. We just need a big bus like the Partridge Family, now."
- Lee Alexander



Lee with Brian Alexander, Emma, Ryan, and Troy Griffin



Ryan Alexander, who sings soprano, placed first in all-region choir

Lee Alexander, award-winning singer and songwriter, is one teacher students do not mind listening to. After years of composing and performing folk, acoustic Americana music, the singer, inspired by his two daughters, is entertaining a younger listening audience and making music on his own terms.

Banding Together

Lee, who won the John Lennon songwriting award in 2009 and was awarded best male vocalist by the *Houston Press* in 2010 for his adult contemporary music, has always enjoyed entertaining his students with silly songs he has written. When his two daughters, Ryan, 14, and Emma, 12, began elementary school, he wanted to include them in his music.

"I had songs I'd written that I knew kids thought were funny," says Lee, who teaches kindergarten through fifth-grade art classes at Bear Creek Elementary School. "My daughters were in the third or fourth grade. These were the waning years of their childhood. If I wanted to do this and have them perform with me while they were still kids, I needed to do this now, otherwise it would be too late."

The Lee Alexander & Co. band, consisting of Lee and his two daughters, his uncle Brian Alexander on percussion, and

Troy Griffin on bass, first started playing at Texas Tradition restaurant in Katy, farmers markets, and other venues throughout Houston.

"We were in the choir in elementary school," says Emma Lee. "Dad asked us to help out with his album, and we said yes."

Lee, who taught himself to play his mother's guitar when he was 13, also plays the piano, accordion, flute, and mandolin. He says the family band allows him to be part of the Katy community without requiring that he be on the road. "It's a family band," he says. "We just need a big bus like the Partridge Family, now."

He and his girls have performed live at Houston radio station 90.1 KPFT, and entertained patients at the Texas Children's Hospital and Shriners' Hospital. "When we first began, it was kind of nerve-racking," says Ryan Alexander, who placed first in all-region choir. "But now we sing and perform in public, and it's just fun."

In Tune with Students

Lee has taught in Katy ISD for 10 years and was awarded teacher of the year in 2009. He says he is as inspired by his students as they are by him. "The younger ones are so much



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fun to work with because they are completely uninhibited,” he explains. “When you get with the older kids, you really start to see the serious artists emerge. It’s so neat to see them grow from not being able to tie their own shoes to being able to draw a self-portrait.”

Lee finds music a helpful tool for teaching. It can assist children with memorization, introduce new ideas, and make learning more fun. “The kids love it,” says Grace Wright, who has three children in Lee’s classes. “They sing along and giggle. Who doesn’t want to hear about a dung beetle making a ball of poop for his wife?”

Her daughter, Claire Witt, a second-grader in Lee’s art class agrees. “I like the detail in his music,” says Witt. “It makes me happy.” Lee admits that while his songs are more silly than educational, his music fills a niche other children’s music has neglected. “The goal was to do music that the parents would enjoy too, and not mind listening to,” says Lee. “There’s a lot of great children’s artists, like The Wiggles, but that can leave you white-knuckled in the car.”

Children of All Ages

Lee’s sound is influenced by favorites such as The Beatles, Willie Nelson, and Merle Haggard. “I like regional music that sounds like where it came from,” says Lee. “Anyone who’s ever picked up a guitar and written a song has in some way influenced me and earned my admiration.” But it is his daughters who have inspired him most and motivated him

to release his first children’s album, *Children of All Ages*. The album, which was released last year, is a collection of songs appropriate for every age. The family recently started a new band called Project Petrichor. The new acoustic/folk band that will include Lee’s wife, Olivia Rice, will be releasing their debut album August 1.

In addition to teaching, songwriting, and performing, Lee finds time to give back to the Katy community. He volunteers at the Texas Wildlife Rehabilitation Coalition Wildlife Center, participates in a local mentor program, and is a sponsor and team manager for Destination Imagination.

“It’s a ton of fun. I get more out of it than I give,” says Lee. “I get rewarding experiences from working with kids and some amazing teachers. It’s a privilege to work with tomorrow’s citizens. When you love what you do, it’s easy.” **KM**

TASSIE HEWITT is a freelance writer and mother of three whose children love to remind her of the silly songs she used to sing to them when they were growing up.



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