



Photos by Bruce McClelland, The Arizona Daily Star

Jason Stephens, a student in TUSD's Project MORE Rock School course, plays solo on an electric guitar and amplifier



Joe Dombrowski says guitar is "universal language"

By Gene Armstrong
The Arizona Daily Star

While most rock musicians are still in bed, about 40 high school students already are plugging in their amps for practice.

From 9:45 to 11:15 each Tuesday and Thursday morning, those students gather to study rock 'n' roll in the cavernous multipurpose room at Project MORE in Tucson Unified School District.

Under the tutelage of Joe Dombrowski, a musician who also teaches social studies and history at this alternative-learning high school, the course called Rock School offers studies in musical theory, technique, songwriting and rock history.

"For most of the kids here, the universal language is guitar," said Dombrowski, a 40-year-old guitarist formerly with the Tucson rock group Gable Wales. "But we have a few singers here and some drummers and bass players.

"I think it's been going pretty well," Dombrowski said modestly of his 3-year-old course. "It could always be better, but we've gotten some

Rock School a gas

Kids dig Project MORE class

good support from the district."

José Dominguez, 21, was there when Rock School started. Although the course is "still in the primal stages," he said Dombrowski has worked hard to make it work.

In the beginning, Dominguez said, the course only had two or three amplifiers, and all the guitars belonged to Dombrowski.

"Now he gets grants and stuff, and they have a lot of instruments," Dominguez says.

Performance and rehearsal are naturally a large part of the course. Dombrowski's class is

equipped with electric and acoustic guitars, electric basses, a couple of drum sets and numerous amplifiers and microphones.

Students can not only study rock 'n' roll chord charts and sheet music — scattered around the Rock School resource center are cabinets full of songbooks by the Rolling Stones, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix and others — but classical sheet music, too.

Also available are recordings and instructional videotapes. Most of the equipment and materials have been donated or bought by Project MORE with the assistance of grant money.

Dombrowski said several local music stores, including Chicago Store and Workshop Music and Sound, help out with loaners.

Students do their part by selling T-shirts and holding car washes to raise funds for musical equipment.

Dominguez, who is the bass player for speed metal band Paradygm, graduated from Project MORE in 1989 and earned a scholarship to study music theory at Pima Community College.

Now a volunteer teaching assistant at Rock School, Dominguez had much praise for Dombrowski, the class and Project MORE in general.

"If it wasn't for Joe's program here, I'd probably still be landscaping for \$5 an hour," he said while two students practiced blues progressions on guitar and bass nearby.

Dominguez's 20-year-old brother, Javier, also graduated from Project MORE and attended Rock School before moving on to PCC. Now he's the

"I hadn't ever even sung into a microphone before," said Maycher, 15, adding that she likes singing electric blues the best.

Another singer, Dena Hargis, waited to sing while a thrash group banged out some heavyweight metal tunes.

Hargis, 17, said she prefers singing '60s rock, especially Dombrowski's compositions. Nevertheless, all the Rock School students are tolerant of the music of others, she said.

Among the musical interests represented are heavy metal, rap, blues, classic rock, hard core punk and classical guitar, Dombrowski said.

"A lot of kids who come out of here feel more confident in going into a career of singing and playing music," Hargis said.

She added that she'd like to earn a living through singing, but that she also plans to study nursing.

Hargis likes Project MORE for its smaller classes and the individual attention each student receives.

In addition to teaching, Dombrowski also leads Lifestyles of the Clean and Sober, a substance-abuse support group for teens, and helps run the Musical Mentors program.

Through the state-funded Musical Mentors, Project MORE students help tutor younger students in music.

As a recent Rock School session extended into the open lunch hour, several other students wandered in to become an audience.

Dombrowski strapped on a guitar to join the impromptu jam by a hard-blues combo.

He outlined the chords and directed the group while taking a few sizzling solos. Maycher sang loose versions of "Summertime" and "Stormy Monday."

"I used to play with them a lot in the beginning," Dombrowski said, recalling when he started the class.

These days at Rock School, more students are ready to join in. "Now for me, it's like trying to fight for time to play."