

So, you want to be a rock 'n' roll star?

Just get an electric guitar, and head to Fantasy Camp (and bring your checkbook)

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K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune

San Diego rehabilitation specialist Blake Thompson, right (with Martha Wilke Murray, center, and bass guitarist Jeff Pilson), puts his best foot forward. He often plays parties with his band, Nowhere Fast, but at camp, he was onstage with Roger Daltrey, left.

LOS ANGELES – The first minutes were just shy of chaotic, a studio full of rock star wannabees, roadies, sound equipment and, of course, lots of guitars. Bill Shoemaker didn't mind the commotion. He had more to worry about than the general lack of order.

This was Hollywood, and the orthopedic surgeon from Rancho Santa Fe was a long way from the operating room. He dragged his fingers absently across the guitar slung from his neck and paced through S.I.R. Studios, where gold records from groups like America and Counting Crows line the walls.

Soon, he would be called to the main stage to audition before a bunch of professional musicians. What had he been thinking when he signed on for this gig? He'd played guitar only three years, and never before a crowd.

"My son told me when I meet Roger Daltrey not to throw up," he said. "Can you get more nervous?"

So began Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp 2005, a five-day detour into the realm of

high living and low expectations, where the rich and successful mingle with knock-around pros of the music industry, and where the roads not taken can trump real life, if only for a long weekend.

The camp is the creation of New York producer David Fishof, who figured if

wealthy baseball fans will pay thousands of dollars to hit and bat with ex-Major Leaguers, amateur musicians would jump at the chance to strike a chord with some legends of rock.

Fishof was right. This year, its fourth, 75 people from across North America doled out \$8,000, plus hotel expenses, to rub shoulders and study music.

The campers would spend four days practicing a pair of songs under the guidance of 10 counselors, all of them professional musicians. Then, they'd square off in a battle of the bands at the House of Blues on Sunset Boulevard.

A TV crew from the Learning Channel was there to document the camp. So was VH-1.

Most of the campers were entrepreneurs, executives, doctors and money men. For this crowd, a few thousand dollars to spend time with an icon like Daltrey, lead singer for the Who, was cheap. They savored a challenge and weren't afraid to fail.

"To push past whatever fears they have and get up on stage, that's a real rush," said Jonathan Halverstadt, a psychotherapist from Northern California invited to the camp by his friend Fishof. "That's just an extension of how driven they are; it's part of their personality."

It took Shoemaker all of four seconds to talk his business partner, rehabilitation specialist and experienced guitarist Blake Thompson, to join him at the camp. But the two doctors, so close in age and career and address, had very different pasts.

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In real life, Bill Shoemaker is a San Diego orthopedic surgeon. At the Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp, he's the closest he'll ever get to being a rock star.

Shoemaker has been married 23 of his 49 years and has four children, ages 10 to 20. He goofed around with music in high school but never got past the pain in the fingertips that goes with learning guitar.

Thompson is 46 and still looking for the right woman. In college he played gigs on Sunset Strip and he still performs at clubs and parties in San Diego with his band, Nowhere Fast.

Shoemaker shuddered at the prospect of playing for an audience at House of Blues. All he wanted from the camp was to be in a band one day without embarrassing himself. "I can't be a rock 'n' roll star anymore," he said. "But being able to play guitar and play it well, that's a good goal."

Thompson was eager to test himself with the pros. He was at the camp to have fun and pick up some pointers – but he also wanted to win.

Two other San Diego County residents were also enrolled. Venture capitalist Barry Rosenbaum, 57, of Del Mar, plays keyboards. Talk-radio host Ray Lucia, 54, of Rancho Bernardo, sings and plays guitar.

Day One: Sign-ins and tryouts

The main studio hall was packed, and campers were still streaming in when the auditions began.

Shoemaker waited nervously until he was called on stage with a handful of other aspiring musicians. After a brief negotiation, the band of strangers settled on the Who classic "I Can't Explain."

The counselors watched closely, trying to assess the talent. At the end of the day, they would divvy up the prospects to form 10 bands.

Shoemaker struck each chord carefully, determined not to make a mistake. He didn't smile until the song ended.

The crowd applauded politely, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

Thompson, among the last to try out, managed the famous lead guitar riffs from "Purple Haze" by Jimi Hendrix like someone who'd played it many times before. If he was nervous, it didn't show.

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Camper Karen Adams-Dimery joins the audience at the House of Blues to cheer on her colleagues during the final performance at fantasy camp.

That night, while the campers were shaking hands and swapping stories, the counselors gathered around a table and bartered until they'd chosen 10 bands.

"We're going to push 'em and push 'em and push 'em," said camp director Jack Blades, the bassist and lead singer from the 1980s group Night Ranger. "But come Monday, one band will be the best."

Shoemaker landed in a band of relative novices, save Chase Johnson, a 16-year-old singer from Laguna Beach whose first compact disc is due out this spring.

Thompson found himself surrounded by longtime musicians. They quickly became one of the early favorites to take top honors in the battle of the bands.

Day Two: Playing with pros

The main goal on the second day was to find a name for each band and choose which two songs to play.

Because Daltrey would perform with every band, each group selected a Who song from a hat.

Shoemaker's group ended up with "The Kids Are Alright," which suited Shoemaker just fine. His 14-year-old son's best friend was suffering complications from an emergency appendectomy, and Shoemaker decided to ask Daltrey to dedicate the song to the boy at the House of Blues.

Thompson's band, which was calling itself FredEx, got "I Can See for Miles." To showcase the band's diverse talents, Thompson suggested a medley for the second song. They'd open with the first two verses of "Time of the Season" by the Zombies, then switch gears to "Statesboro Blues," the old Blind Willie McTell tune made famous by the Allman Brothers. The combination would highlight their vocals and give each player a short solo.

Their counselor was Jeff Pilson, a bass player who toured with Dokken, the Hollywood Allstarz and other bands. Right away, Pilson sensed he had something special with this group. They were obviously comfortable with their instruments and each other.

The drummer was a sales manager from Orange County, the singer a retired woman executive from Bucks County, Pa. Thompson would play

lead guitar and sing backup.

Meanwhile, Shoemaker's band settled on the name Viagra Falls for the collection of mostly novice musicians. For their second song they chose a Bad Company favorite, "Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy," out of respect for their counselor, Simon Kirke, the drummer from the 1970s band.

Shoemaker's fish-out-of-water sensibilities were evaporating quickly. He was clearly having fun. All he wanted from this day was to work through the rhythm guitar sections of "The Kids Are Alright" as best he could.

Day Three: Practice, practice

Pulling a song together, even a familiar one, is more difficult than it sounds. Every note, chord, backing vocal and drumbeat must be mapped out. Some bands work a particular passage 10 or 20 times before getting it right.

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Bill Shoemaker (center) plays at the HOB in Hollywood. He's flanked by Jeff Bronchick (right) and Chase Johnson.

Pilson, the FedEx coach, pushed the singers in Thompson's group to try the harmonies on "Time of the Season" again and again.

"I'm sorry everybody else isn't in on this," he said at one point. "But we're building a house from the ground up."

Things were lighter at the Viagra Falls rehearsal.

"The Kids Are Alright" sounded pretty good, Shoemaker was growing more comfortable by the hour and the shaggy teenage singer looked and sounded every bit the rock star.

But when Daltrey dropped by for an unscheduled visit, backs stiffened and the room grew quiet.

Daltrey picked up a nearby guitar, which happened to be Shoemaker's spare, and the band broke into the opening riffs of "The Kids Are Alright."

The amateurs thought they were in sync, but Daltrey scolded them for missing some chords. "It's not all in one note," he snapped.

During the next run-through, Daltrey crouched alongside Shoemaker and showed him precisely where to put his fingers. About 45 minutes later, the Who frontman shrugged and left, mildly satisfied with the band's progress.

"How much stress can you have in one day?" Shoemaker said to no one in particular. "Man, I'd rather be in the operating room – not really. He played both my guitars; that's pretty cool."

Thompson and FredEx missed the surprise visit Daltrey made to most of the bands. By luck of the draw, they were relegated to an overflow studio six blocks to the south, on Cole Avenue.

Day Four: Bonding with Jack Daniel's

To an untrained ear, it was hard to imagine that the drips and pieces of music drifting out of FredEx's studio would ever come together into a polished medley.

But camp counselor Pilson sensed he might have a winning band. He pressed them to master every section, every transition, and then conjugate the drops into a rolling stream of words and melody.

Someone placed a half-pint of Jack Daniel's on top of one of the amplifiers – part homage, part inspiration.

"We're almost there, but Dan and I are playing one thing and you're playing another," said Thompson, who had emerged as one of the band's leaders. "It's just a matter of one note."

By late morning on day four, the work was paying off. FredEx's verses of "Time of the Season" were better than good. The transition into "Statesboro Blues" was seamless.

Before they broke for lunch, Pilson summoned the band to the center of the room. "Does anybody mind if we get a little cosmic?" he asked.

They formed a circle and wrapped their arms around each another, breathing together as one giant organism. Music is the highest of man's

consciousness, Pilson told them. He urged them to read each other's minds, let go of their thoughts and allow instinct to take over.

Over lunch, Thompson and Shoemaker laughed and traded anecdotes from the morning, but for Thompson the pressure had begun to build. The concert was barely 24 hours away, and he had a growing tension headache.

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Blake Thompson does some last-minute practicing in his hotel room prior to this band, FredEx, taking the stage at the House of Blues on the final day of camp.

Later that afternoon, when Daltrey strolled in to listen to FredEx, Thompson and the other band members were all business. They performed "I Can See for Miles" and Daltrey nodded approvingly. He sang lead on a second take and then surprised everybody by pronouncing the band fit for the contest.

"How many times have you played it? You just did it so fluidly," Daltrey said.

Thompson was beaming. "Roger Daltrey used my earplugs," he bragged.

Instead of relaxing, however, FredEx skipped afternoon presentations by Jim Keltner of the Traveling Wilburys and Jane Wiedlin from the Go Gos to spend more time rehearsing.

Six blocks north, Viagra Falls had already stopped practicing because the singer had a sore throat. But Shoemaker and several others kept jamming, polishing their craft.

As the surgeon packed up for the day, he saw Daltrey across the hall, working with another band. When the session was over, Shoemaker approached the singer with the big question: Would Daltrey dedicate "The Kids Are Alright" to his son's ailing friend?

Daltrey said yes, and Shoemaker walked away a happy man.

Day Five: Showtime

As the bands began their last rehearsals, it was clear the two physicians' roles had quietly turned full circle over the five-day camp. Shoemaker, so

nervous he could barely sit still before the audition, was downright jolly. Thompson was serious and focused; like his friend a few days earlier, he was the picture of anxiety.

Fishof visited each studio, thanking the campers and reminding them to be at the House of Blues by 1:30. Showtime was 3 p.m. sharp, and they had to be out by 8.

Tickets were \$50 a pop, but that didn't stop one camper from chartering a bus for 40 of his closest admirers.

Shoemaker arranged for a limousine to shuttle his wife, daughter and some co-workers to Hollywood for the show. Thompson left tickets at will call for his brother and sister-in-law.

By 2:30 p.m., the House of Blues was packed with wives and children, husbands, parents, and friends. Fishof urged the audience to push forward, close to the stage, for the TV cameras.

Shoemaker's band was scheduled first, but there was a glitch: No one could find Daltrey.

Viagra Falls settled in a hallway just off the stage and tried to stay loose.

"I'm going to have fun, that's my goal," said Shoemaker, with only the slightest trace of fear in his voice. "I want to feel the power of that chord change on stage."

Twenty minutes later, Shoemaker was squinting beneath the stage lights, hunting for his wife in the crowd before Viagra Falls broke into "Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy."

It was a respectable showing, a welcome warm-up for an appreciative crowd. Shoemaker triumphantly flung a guitar pick toward his wife. It was as close as he'd get to being a rock star.

Things got even better when Daltrey stepped to the mic and dedicated "The Kids Are Alright," to Brad in San Diego. "The surgery went wrong, but he's on his way back now, and we're real glad," Daltrey said.

The song came off in fine style. When the doctor emerged from backstage he wrapped an arm around his wife, sweat pouring from his brow.

An hour later, FredEx gathered in a circle on the stage, clasped hands and leaned their heads in close, just as they had done the day before. Then, they launched into their medley.

The performance took a full 10 minutes. The transition from "Time of the Season" was seamless, the cover of "Statesboro Blues" lustful. Daltrey emerged from the wings clapping loudly.

"You were working out there!" he shouted. The crowd was screaming, wowed.

AdvertisementBut when Daltrey got up to sing "I Can See for Miles" with the band, the joy quickly faded.

Somewhere between choruses the Who singer forgot the words. The band members glanced nervously at one another.

"Where are we?" Daltrey asked sheepishly.

Someone yelled out the next line, and they finished the song.

"Am I fired, guys?" Daltrey joked when they finished.

Thompson joined Shoemaker in the audience. The two doctors parked themselves near the front of the stage, waiting for the counselors to choose the top band. One camper used the moment to pop the question to his girlfriend. She said yes and the crowd cheered madly.

Some people in the audience began chanting "FredEx! FredEx!"

Ten minutes passed before Fishof announces the winners.

Cone of Silence, radio host Ray Lucia's band, won best band.

FredEx took best cover song. Viagra Falls got the prize for best name.

Thompson was disappointed, but the sting of defeat quickly faded in the

excitement of the moment. Band members were trading e-mail addresses and swapping digital photos. There was talk of a FedEx reunion, maybe even a recording session.

Part of Thompson wished Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp would never end; he dreaded the messages that had piled up in his real world while he was gone.

Shoemaker, still glowing from his once-in-a-lifetime turn on the House of Blues stage, started talking about something he'd be taking home with him – a deeper appreciation for art and creativity.

"Their passion comes through loud and clear," he said of the music pros he came to know. "This has helped rejuvenate my passion, which is medicine."

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