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YOUNG MUSIC MAN

Rocco Fiorentino, 10, is gifted indeed. Page 3.

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A clear musical vision

Rocco Fiorentino, just 10 and blind since birth, is already an accomplished trouper and eloquent advocate.

By Rusty Pray

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

What's special about Rocco Fiorentino?

A better question would be: What isn't?

The 10-year-old boy plays piano and drums, and has just taken up the saxophone. Blessed with perfect pitch, he sings with a voice that is clear, melodic and surprisingly powerful. He sings well enough to have been among a handful of members chosen to perform solos at the Jubilate Deo Chorale's Christmas concert last Sunday.

He also has been totally blind since birth.

Talking the other day about adding the sax to his aggregation of instruments, he said, "Pretty soon I'm going to be this multi-... No, wait I already am" — and laughed.

"I use the sax sometimes in my recording," Rocco said. "I'd rather use a live sax than a sound produced by the keyboard."

Rocco has a recording studio in the basement of the Voorhees home he shares with his mother, Tina; father, Rocco; a dog named Louie; and a cockatiel named Coco.

The fourth grader at Signal Hill School is a seasoned trouper who has performed at a variety of venues, including the Iridium Jazz Club in New York — jazz is his favorite music — the Library for the Blind and Handicapped in Trenton, the National Constitution Center, and at a Camden Riversharks game.

Rocco was born at Pennsylvania Hospital four months premature — the first day of Tina Fiorentino's 24th week of pregnancy. He weighed 1 1/2 pounds and was a twin. His twin didn't make it. Doctors gave Rocco a 3 to 5 percent chance to live, his mother said.

ON THE COVER

Voorhees fourth grader Rocco Fiorentino plays drums in his basement recording studio. Inquirer photo by Rose Howerter.



Rocco Fiorentino plays both an electronic keyboard and grand piano in his living room. He also plays drums, and just added saxophone.

ROSE HOWERTER / Inquirer Suburban Staff

He spent four months in an incubator and six months in various hospitals.

His blindness is the result of premature retinopathy, a disorder that primarily affects babies weighing less than 3 pounds at birth and are born before 31 weeks of pregnancy.

While he was in the incubator, music was piped in as part of the process. His parents chose classical and jazz. His mother believes his hearing music in the incubator is what gave him perfect pitch, and "that enables him to duplicate music very easily."

Rocco said he can play a song just from listening to it on the radio. He wouldn't be good right away, he said, but "I could play it well within a week."

Rocco, who takes piano and voice lessons, was 2 the first time he sat down at a piano with his mother, who also plays.

"Part of our routine every day was playing the piano," she said. "We would play a game: Find the note. He would pick whatever key I touched."

Music is not the only thing in Rocco's life. He is an advocate

for children who are blind and visually impaired. He is a spokesperson for the March of Dimes and the Little Rock Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by his mother and father to help educate parents and families of children who are visually impaired.

He has spoken on behalf of blind children at the Statehouse. He goes to elementary schools and gives demonstrations on his braillewriter and talks to other children about what it's like to be blind. Those are just a few of his activities related to blindness.

"It has been an incredible road for him," his mother said. "To



Rocco has sung at a variety of venues, including with the Jubilate Deo Chorale.



Rocco plays drums for his mother, Tina Fiorentino. "He has taught me about life," she says. "He has shown me how simple it can be."

watch him develop and grow — he's like a sponge. He takes in everything, and he has an absolute passion for music." Rocco shrugs off being unable to see.

"If you close your eyes, it would be scary to you if you tried to walk or something like that," he said. "To me, it's normal. I have never seen anything and never will, so it's all kind of the same to me."

Tina Fiorentino says she has

learned much from her son. "He has taught me about life," she said. "My life has been changed dramatically because of him. He has shown me how simple it can be. He doesn't care what you wear, how much money you make, what kind of car you drive. Those things have no meaning to him."

Contact staff writer Rusty Pray at 856-779-3894 or rpray@phillynews.com.