

## **Drummer Boy: Jesse Gamiz teaches himself how to play drums at Boardwalk simulator**

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□ Jesse Gamiz Jr. rocks behind his drum set in his Salinas home. With a solid beat and a good presence, Gamiz usually draws a crowd at the Boardwalk's drum machine. (Bill Lovejoy / Sentinel)

Jesse Gamiz Jr. just started the fourth grade, and he already knows how to work a crowd. Most Friday nights, the 9-year-old from Salinas can be found seated at the drum simulator at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, surrounded by dozens of people requesting he play everything from Metallica to Van Halen. "Every time he gets up, there's a crowd," said San Jose resident Mark Gonzales, a drummer who's seen several of Jesse's Friday night performances. "He's a good drummer. He's got a solid beat and a good presence." After hearing Jesse's rolling drum solos, most people are surprised to hear he's never had any formal training and has only been playing for about five months. His father, Jesse Gamiz Sr., said the moment his son picked up a set of drum sticks, he knew he had something special. "I noticed he had a talent — that's one of the main reasons I bring him here," he said. The father and son travel to the Boardwalk most Fridays so that Jesse can practice playing on the MTV Drumscape, a drumming simulator similar to a karaoke machine. Performers can play along with the recorded music, and because the songs are sans drums, players make up their own rhythm and beat — a task that some find difficult. "I took drum lessons for 10 years, and he's better than me," said Steve Legallet, a child therapist and Santa Cruz resident. Legallet and his family attended a Friday night Band on the Beach concert at the Boardwalk last month, and while walking through the arcade after the show, stopped to see why a crowd was gathered around the drums. "I've never seen such an amazing kid at his age," he said. "He makes it look effortless." Jesse's parents recently bought him a starter drum kit, but because he lives in an apartment, he can only play during certain hours and when his neighbors are gone. Jesse Gamiz Sr. has taught his son a few moves, but drum lessons, which start at about \$20 per half-hour session, are beyond the family's budget. Although he spends about the same amount of money on gas traveling to and from the Boardwalk, he said it's worth it. His son is able to play for hours and has access to a variety of songs, he said. Plus, how many kids get the chance to play in front of screaming fans? "I enjoy watching the crowd," Jesse Gamiz Sr. said. "I enjoy when he plays a song, and they clap and they cheer him. I enjoy that, and he enjoys it, too." Jesse likes pleasing the crowd, and he happily takes requests. At \$1 a song, the fans will usually pay to hear Jesse play their favorite tunes. For Jesse Gamiz Sr. and his wife, Laura, Jesse's achievements go beyond cheering fans. When he was about 6 months old, Jesse began developing chronic ear infections. He underwent several medical procedures to open up his ear canals, but the problem persisted. "There was a limit to his speech," he said. "We were kind of scared he would lose his hearing." Even with limited hearing, Jesse always enjoyed music, and his parents tried to encourage his interest. Music was a household staple, and Jesse Gamiz Sr. began teaching his son chords on the piano when he was just 3. Jesse fully recovered by the age of 5, and his hearing has since been fine. Jesse Gamiz Sr. said he thinks Jesse's earlier struggles allowed him to connect with music. "He really has an ear now for every type of music he hears," he said. Jim Norris, a local drummer who has played with such acts as The Humans, Dresden and Dizzy Burnett, also began playing at the age of 9. He said music isn't heard only with the ears. Vibrations from music can be felt throughout the entire body, he said. "You can feel rhythm when you can't even hear it," said Norris, who teaches at the Santa Cruz New Music School. "Rhythm, dance, music — it's all in your life." For Jesse, playing the drums at the Boardwalk is all about having a good time. He gets to play along with some of his favorite bands, and the attention he gets from spectators isn't too bad, either. "I get to do solos," he said. "I get to use the symbols a lot." The Gamiz family will always support Jesse's interest in music, and Jesse Gamiz Sr. said that playing at the Boardwalk has given him self-esteem to keep working toward his goals. "Not only does he get to practice, he enjoys it," he said. "We also enjoy watching the faces of the crowd. It makes us proud and really happy." **Contact Justine DaCosta at [svreeken@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:svreeken@santacruzsentinel.com).**