

MUSICAL MOM

Melissa Levis shares her passion for performance with children.



Melissa and her muse.



by Melissa Levis

Four years ago, I delivered twins. One was a beautiful, bouncing boy who painlessly entered the world thanks to induced labor and an early epidural; the other was a million dollar Off-Broadway musical that sprung to life after four years of labor.

Though my son's debut preceded my musical by five months, I cherished my show like my first born. My husband and I lovingly nurtured it through readings, auditions, rewrites, Off-Off-Broadway productions, agents, producers and investors until its birth at the 500-seat Variety Arts Theatre in Manhattan? in the spring of 2004. Ever the protective mother, I fought for my child. But the show closed after two months. If the producer had allowed it time to crawl, I swear it would have run forever. However, as the saying goes, that's showbiz.

I took time off to be a full-time mom while I figured out my professional plan B. I was so disappointed by the theater, I decided to forget art. I would sell out and at least make money. I interviewed at an investment bank and in advertising, but I knew both industries weren't for me.

I told my understanding husband that I needed time away, and my son and I went to spend the summer at The Wilburton Inn, my parents' country inn in Manchester, Vermont.

I thought helping my family's inn would be fulfilling work. The only problem was that the terrific local daycare was full. My mom suggested that I volunteer to be the music teacher and perhaps the facility would find a space my tot. Though that space never opened, I found my professional calling. I discovered that I loved sharing music with children. Hearing kids respond to music was even more satisfying than hearing an audience laugh during previews. If children liked my song, I knew I had a hit. If they were bored, it was back to the drawing board.

The time I spent being a mommy was my market research. Every time my son frustrated or delighted me, I turned it into a song. Car trips to New York were the best writing time. I'd bring along a tape recorder and angle the rearview mirror where I could see my son. He would clap his hands and pat his head in his car seat. And through singing together, our five-hour drive flew by. By August, I starred in a TV show on Vermont cable access using the moniker *Moey's Music Party* that turned me into a mini-celebrity at the local Friendly's. *Moey's Music Party* has since become the name I use for a class I teach, my children's CD and my family

friendly band. I adored small-town life, but my husband was in New York.

Breaking into any career in New York is hard, and it was frustrating to be a beginner at age 35. I began by working two hours a week as the music teacher at the Congregation Habonim Nursery School. I volunteered as a music teacher at Shaaray Tefila's Nursery School. Thanks to Craig's List, I found a terrific job at a popular Upper East Side mommy and me center and preschool. I taught music to more than 300 children a week for three years.

My son's 3rd birthday party gave me the idea for my original *Moey's Music Party Mommy and Me* music class. The day after his *Thomas the Train*-themed party, my child heartbroken when he heard that he'd have to wait a whole other year for his next birthday party. It gave me the idea to create a music class where every day is a party. Kids can dress up and enjoy instruments, songs, dances, hats and props. Children can even take home presents that relate to kids party themes like pirates, trains, princesses, fiestas, cowboys, firemen and holidays. I've come full circle, and Oriental Trading Company—where I bought my son's *Thomas the Train* birthday supplies—is now my sponsor, supplying the wonderful pompoms and maracas that I use at my classes.

An important part of each class is my original musical puppet show based on classic fairy tales and Aesop's Fables. I disliked the violence and outdated gender roles in the bedtime stories I read my son at night. Why did girls need to be rescued? In my songs, Little Red Riding Hood gives the wolf a judo kick, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White wake up by giving *themselves* a kiss, and The Little Red Hen, The Ant and The Grasshopper teach their friends how to share and be good role models. Having grown up on *Free To Be You and Me*, I want to pass on the tradition of fairy tales but do it in a way that is relevant and inspiring.

Three years after becoming the toast of Friendly's, I'm delighted to say that *Moey Mania* is sweeping Manhattan. Central Park Conservancy hired my band of banjo, drums and guitar to give 12 free concerts in Central Park playgrounds. The New York Public Library hired our band to bring free concerts to children in branches from The Bronx to The Lower East Side this winter. I have become "The Pied Piper in Pink," spreading free music to the children of New York. It seems that every weekend we perform at birthday parties in Dylan's Candy Bar, Chelsea Piers or living rooms across New York City. In 2008, we gave 65 concerts, including performances at Bank Street Bookstore, Barnes and Noble, The Tribeca Film Festival, The JCC, Union Square Park, Carl Shurz Park and The Children's Museum in the Hamptons.

Last fall, I returned Off-Broadway, not only as a writer and producer, but also as a performer. Daryl Roth, the esteemed Broadway producer, is a grandma dedicated to creating theater for children. She heard my *Moey's Music Party* CD and invited me to create a show for the DR2 Theatre in Union Square. *Moey Live—P is for Party!* was a mommy power production with moms designing the set, postcards, costumes and props. What a pleasure to introduce children to the delights of musical theater!

My son brought my heart and career back to center stage, and I'm thrilled to say we are both thriving and continuing to find the simple joys that come from making music.

Melissa Levis, aka Moey, is an award-winning Off-Broadway songwriter and children's entertainer. She leads weekly Moey's Music Party classes at Café Noite on Second Avenue and 85th Street and on West 96th Street at Symphony Space, all in Manhattan. She teaches music at New York City's PS 158 and frequently entertains with her band at concerts and birthday parties. To buy Moey's Dr. Toy award-winning Moey's Music Party CD, register for classes or watch Moey videos, visit www.moeymusicparty.com and call (917)680-6739.