

Blues artist continues to help a budding young drummer

First, he gave the boy a snare and now a cymbal and more

By **CLAUDIA ROWE** (SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER)

He thought it was just an evening out with Dad, a holiday show where the Christmas story would be told in song and he'd leave with a paper program. Instead, Avery Foster, 9, walked out of Langston Hughes' "Black Nativity" with a gleaming new cymbal in hand and the fond gaze of his musical idol forever in mind.

All because he grabbed a plastic milk crate and began banging away on the street last spring.

That impromptu drum session caught the eye of a Seattle Post-Intelligencer photographer, and [the resulting newspaper photograph](#) in May inspired blues drummer Tony Coleman to give the boy his own treasured snare, the same one he'd played behind legendary bluesman B.B. King for a decade.

Coleman was back in Seattle for a drumming gig with the "Black Nativity" band at Intiman Theatre last week, and he learned that his young protégé had been practicing almost every day, bragging to friends about the instrument in his room that had been to 88 countries.

"I thought, why not give him another little boost for Christmas, another little gift to help him along his journey?" said Coleman, voted Best R&B Drummer of the Year in 1998 by Drum Magazine.

He presented Avery with a new Sabian cymbal and a bag of other goodies donated by the Donn Bennett Drum Studio in Bellevue.

During intermission, he stepped off the stage and told the audience how he had met Avery, about the newspaper photo and the spirit of Christmas, and Avery, sitting in the front row totally unprepared for what was happening, clapped his hands over his face.

"I thought he was going to make me play in front of everybody," the boy said later, his plump cheeks shining.

For Coleman, seeing Avery in the paper, beating on a milk crate, had been a powerful reminder of a childhood raised on welfare, when he would pound with any stick on anything that might make a noise. By the time he was 16, he was playing professional gigs in Kissimmee, Fl. and at 20, working Chicago blues clubs. "When I was his age, I would have really appreciated if someone of my caliber came to my rescue," he said. "That would have been like a dream come true. So I felt like, well, I'll do something to help this kid."

Donn Bennett signed on with the cowbell, bell mount and drumsticks after talking with Coleman about the little things that had made huge differences in his own life, the way a small gesture from a stranger could change things forever.

"There's a thing with drummers, kind of a primitive thing even, where we really love passing on what we do to the next generation," Bennett said. "This kid appreciates this stuff, and he wants to be a drummer in a gigantic way, so I jumped at the chance to help."

Some parents might cringe at Avery's dream, with its attendant thudding, crashing practices. But Avery Foster Sr. is just happy his son is getting some attention.

Every afternoon when the boy comes home from Madrona Elementary School, Avery Jr. puts a practice pad over his snare and his father tries not to make important phone calls.

His starry-eyed son has stumbled into a hobby that just might turn into a life.

Stranger things have happened.



Karen Ducey / P-I

Avery Foster receives a snare drum from Tony Coleman after the blues drummer saw a photo of the youngster playing on a milk crate in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in May. On a return trip to Seattle last week, Coleman presented the boy with a cymbal, cowbell, bell mount and drumsticks.