

Former Metallica bassist Jason Newsted: from rock star to art star in South Florida

In an interview in his Jupiter studio, Jason Newsted, former Metallica bassist talks about the last couple of weeks worth of paintings. Art Miami and Wynwood will be hosting some of his pieces. He paints a few hours a day, between loud music and discusses his "self pity portrait," wherein he conveys the symbolism behind being homeless.

Ben Crandell, December 1, 2017

It was a chance introduction at a restaurant last February, Valentine's Day, when former Metallica bassist Jason Newsted, an artist who had been painting in relative anonymity for more than a decade, and Nick Korniloff, director of Art Miami and Art New York, began an association that has brought Newsted's outsider art international attention and given Korniloff a kindred spirit who has helped him deal with a profound personal loss.

They were longtime neighbors near **Jupiter** Inlet, but had never met before this moment of serendipity. Perhaps it was something more.

"These introductions ... I'm sorry if I get a little emotional. They come from my son," Korniloff says, his voice breaking. "I feel them. I feel a power from above."

On Friday, Dec. 1, Newsted and Korniloff will be at the **Palm Beach** Cultural Council in **Lake Worth** for the opening of "Rawk — The Art of Jason Newsted," an exhibit of his paintings that runs through Feb. 3. The gathering, which includes an acoustic performance by Newsted and the Chophouse Band, is also a benefit for the Cultural Council, the Perry J. Cohen Foundation and the first Palm Beach County chapter of Little Kids Rock, a national program that supports underfunded music programs in public schools.

The name Perry Cohen may be familiar. In the summer of 2015, Perry, Korniloff's 14-year-old stepson, and his friend Austin Stephanos, also 14, left Jupiter on a fishing trip and never returned. In the wake of the tragedy, Korniloff and Pamela Cohen, his wife and Perry's mother, **created the Perry J. Cohen Foundation**, which supports groups working in the arts, environmental and marine education, teen entrepreneurship and boating-safety instruction.

Recalling the horror he felt as the man he had just met told the story of his son's disappearance, Newsted admits he created a small disturbance among Valentine's Day restaurant patrons at nearby tables by letting loose some heavy-metal profanity.

"When he sat there that night and told me that, my heart went in my stomach," says Newsted, whose dock faces a favorite fishing spot for Perry and his dad. "I knew his son, by his look, by his boat. I watched him go up the inlet, fishing, netting, all that stuff. I knew who that kid was. We all did."

Newsted invited Korniloff over for some therapeutic bashing on the drum set in his home music studio, and a short time later, Korniloff was standing in front of the drums admiring a painting on the wall behind them. Learning that Newsted himself had painted it, Korniloff asked if there were others. That's when Newsted's life changed forever.

Rustoleum never sleeps

There is always music on in Newsted's paint-splashed Jupiter studio, once the living room of an unassuming bright-blue house a short bike ride from the Jupiter Island home he shares with wife, Nicole, a painter who works on the other side of the studio. Tom Waits and Johnny Cash are staples on his eclectic playlist, with Donnie Hathaway, **Al Green**, Cypress Hill, Slayer, Sepultura, Jason Isbell, Neil Young and Muse making regular appearances. Lately, he's been into influential 1960s reggae icon Prince Buster.



Jason Newsted in his Jupiter studio, where the former Metallica bassist creates paintings now priced in the six figures. (Lee Hershfield / Sun Sentinel)

“New heroes, old heroes. I can always find something in the music to get me to the next step in the painting,” says Newsted, twitching with nervous energy, his white T-shirt and painter’s pants splattered in a year’s worth of random colors, which also cover the floor. On easels and leaning against the walls are dozens of Newsted’s latest works, bold, colorful canvases covered in abstract human figures, animals, text and symbols that echo with the influence of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Purvis Young and Jean Dubuffet (many of the works are embedded with local sand and soil).

It was music that inadvertently led Newsted to discover his talent for painting after he injured himself moving recording equipment, tearing a rotator cuff and biceps, which began a series of three surgeries on both shoulders from 2004 to 2008. After one surgery on his right shoulder in 2006, Newsted was rehabilitating at his Montana ranch and, unable to lift his bass, he started playing around with his wife’s oil paints while watching the film “Basquiat.”

It was not pretty.

“I was whacked out on Vicodin out in the middle of nowhere in the mountains feeling sorry for myself,” says Newsted, who was familiar with Basquiat thanks to Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich, who owned his paintings. “I got the paints, and I slung it all over the place. I couldn’t move, so I had to throw it.”

His wife returned from the grocery store and promptly ordered Newsted into their barn, where he began to experiment with the Rustoleum they used on their farm equipment and a snow brush, using his left hand to dip the brush into paint poured into an old drum head. A decade later, Newsted still uses his left hand to paint, and you’ll still find Rustoleum in some of this paintings.

New York moments

After a 15-year run with Metallica — performing on such seminal albums as “... And Justice for All” and “Metallica,” and being inducted into the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** in 2009 — Newsted’s musical focus these days is playing acoustic guitar in the Chophouse Band. He

had a lengthy performance schedule plotted out for 2017, but that all changed when Korniloff asked about his paintings in February.

“I was very impressed,” says Korniloff, who had an idea to pair Newsted’s paintings with an exhibition titled “Rockers” by acclaimed rock photographer Bob Gruen at Art New York in May. “He does these two-handed paintings that he calls tapestries, and I fell in love with them. I thought they were so balanced and creative, the layers, the colors, it was something unique. These are not derivative. They are his own.”

Six weeks after their first meeting, Newsted’s paintings were being shown at Art New York, a prestigious international exhibition, where Korniloff positioned Newsted’s booth adjacent to one by the Parisian gallery 55Bellechasse, which specializes in emerging artists. By the end of the exhibition, representatives of 55Bellechasse were talking to Newsted about representing his work.



Jason Newsted with Metallica on the Monsters of Rock tour in 1988. (Wendi Browan / Sun Sentinel)

It was at Art New York that Newsted discovered that a lot of CEOs and hedge-fund managers grew up listening to Metallica.

“Guy comes up and says, ‘Hey, Jay, how much for that one?’ And then, ‘How much for that one?’ And I tell him, and he says, ‘I’ll take them all.’ And I’m like, ‘Whaaat?’ Newsted says. “He hands me his card, and it says, ‘hedge fund blah blah,’ and he goes, ‘Man, I saw you in the Meadowlands, bro.’ Those guys now run the f---ing world.”

Three weeks ago, Newsted formally signed the deal with 55Bellechasse, and his paintings are now priced as high as \$125,000. Six sold in the first week after he signed with 55Bellechasse.

“I’m in a whole new world in the last six months, bro,” Newsted says.

The promise of youth

The popularity of Newsted’s paintings will have a direct effect on Palm Beach County: He’s donating the proceeds from sales of the “Rawk” exhibition to the Palm Beach Cultural

Council, the Perry J. Cohen Foundation and Little Kids Rock. Same for the more modestly priced T-shirts, mugs, key chains, buttons and tote bags he'll have on hand. Proceeds from other exhibits, including Art Miami beginning Dec. 5, will also benefit the three programs. Newsted has scheduled a second performance with the Chophouse Band on Jan. 12 at the Palm Beach Cultural Council, where he and his band will back up young musicians he has been teaching at his studio as part of a mentorship program he calls Mettle Mentor. He has five students, from Dreyfoos School of the Arts and Jupiter Community High School. "It beats a plaque on a building," Newsted says. "When you buy one of these paintings, this is what you get. You see the result, something singing and playing back to you. That promise, it's there for you to see."

Newsted is part of an impressive list of partners for the Perry J. Cohen Foundation, which has received support from the Miami Dolphins Foundation, the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation and the University of Miami's University of Miami's Rosenfield School of Marine and Atmospheric Science.

"Jason is definitely a like-minded partner," Korniloff says. "Not just because he's a multitalented artist, but he's a really great human who cares for the environment, cares for the arts, and really loves to work with kids and help them with their creativity."

"Rawk — The Art of Jason Newsted" opens 7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 1, at the Palm Beach Cultural Council, 601 Lake Ave., in Lake Worth. Tickets cost \$25, with meet-and-greet tickets also available. Call 561-471-2901 or go to PalmBeachCulture.com/Newsted or Facebook.com/PerryJCohen.