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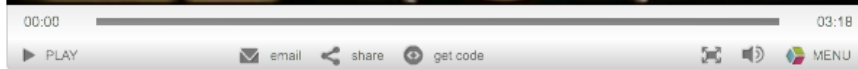
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## Rapper with autism finds therapy in music (video)

By Stephanie Cary, Staff Writer  
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Posted: 04/29/2013 08:36:29 AM PDT  
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At 21, Rio Wyles still displays all the classic signs of autism.

He avoids eye contact with a stranger who tries to initiate a conversation with him, and seems eager to run away from the situation. It's an expected reaction because autism is strongly associated with social, verbal and nonverbal communication problems.

But then the young Playa del Rey resident puts on his black sunglasses, grabs a microphone and, suddenly, he turns into Soulshocka - an ambitious rapper who "reps" Venice Beach for more "street cred."

"I started rapping when I was 8 or 9," Rio says as he sits on a couch in an Inglewood recording studio.

"I was at Tower Records. The first song I really heard was 'Can't Touch This' by MC Hammer."

The recording studio is part of Performing Arts Studio West, an entertainment company that caters to adults with developmental disabilities, including Asperger's syndrome, autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and others.

Rio has been part of the company for the past two years and is prepping to perform in its May 3 show "Recovered" at the James Armstrong Theatre in Torrance.



Rio Wyles is a rapper with autism who performs with the Performing Arts Studio West. The group is doing an original musical featuring classic rock songs reinterpreted and performed by people with development disabilities. The PASW studio is in Inglewood. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

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The founder of the company, John Paizis, has been an adult special education teacher since 1980. In his spare time, he also was an entertainer and realized great benefits could come from combining the two, especially for those with autism.

"Being able to look somebody in the eye and effectively communicate is super important for these guys," Paizis said.

His entertainment company puts performers into situations "where the curriculum kind of forces them to do that by doing acting scenes where they need to have eye contact with people, where they need to vocalize, where they need to be heard. "

The company offers a variety of classes, including singing, song writing, music production, dance and all styles of acting. And each offers something different.

For example, Paizis said, dancing helps autistic adults learn

body language and how to become more aware of how much space their body takes up. Music lets them see a sequence of events that ends with a finished product.

"Music classes are fabulous for them," Paizis said. "And a lot of the population has a proclivity toward music since they were kids, especially some of our high functioning kids - so communication, body language, being able to put their best foot forward in any kind of social situation, that really helps. "

**Video:** [Soulshocka performs "Yonkers"](#)

Rio knew he wanted to be a rapper since the time he was about age 4. In fact, after he was diagnosed at 3 years old, a doctor at UCLA told his parents to find something he enjoys doing and to let him follow that path.

"Fortunately for us, he loved music, and so music is his way back into the world," said Rio's father, David Wyles.

Since finding his passion, Wyles said, Rio has become more comfortable with other people and with himself.

He writes his own raps, drawing inspiration from his diagnosis and writing lines like: "Who's the guy on the short bus causing a fuss?" And another: "The doc said I couldn't do it, but now they have to face the music. "

He performed an original song at the United Nations Headquarters for World Autism Awareness Day earlier this month, as well as at a March benefit for Autism Speaks at Club Nokia

in Los Angeles.

But despite his willingness to perform for autism organizations, he said he's trying to stay away from it.

"He wants to be known as a rapper and not an autistic rapper," said his dad. "And that's true. He is a rapper first and foremost, and autism is the back story. "

In a striking moment, when asked where Rio would be today if he hadn't found music as a young boy, his father softly says "lost. "

Rio, on the other hand, is more blunt.

"I'd either be in a group home, or ... yeah," he said. "Music has the potential of getting me out of the hole. So pretty much, it got me out of the grind. "

And he doesn't plan to stop.

One day the family was returning home from a doctor's appointment where they learned Rio might not mature any further.

When they stopped at a record store to browse, Rio's mom asked him if he would like to work there someday.

"No, I want to be a rapper and own my own label," he said. "You gotta dream bigger than that Mom. "

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## Want to go?

**What:** Performing Arts Studio West presents an original musical featuring performers with developmental disabilities.

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday May 3

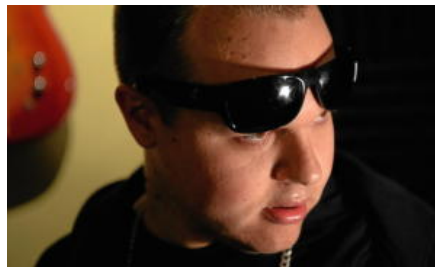
**Where:** James Armstrong Theatre, 3330 Civic Center Drive, Torrance

**Information:** Tickets are \$25. Call 310-674-1346 , Ext. 202, or go to [pastudiowest.com](http://pastudiowest.com)

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Students with the Performing Arts Studio West rock to a rap version of "Dazed and Confused" by Led Zeppelin. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)



Rio Wyles is a rapper with autism who performs with the Performing Arts Studio West. (Brad Graverson / Staff Photographer)

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