

"School of Rock" made a big splash when it came out back in 2003 and seven years later, it continues to be one of the top favorite film rentals for both kids and adults.

The delightful musical comedy, starring the irreverent Jack Black, is testament to the transformative powers of rock 'n' roll. It served as a catalyst for the development of a new type of music program aimed at getting kids excited about playing instruments and singing together in rock bands. Such programs quickly began sprouting up around the country.

Here in Woodinville, there's Spotlight Studios, a music facility with its own school of rock or "jam academy."

Only, this program isn't geared solely toward children.

"We have musicians from 7 to 70, who are enrolled in our jam academy," explains Chris Griffin, owner of Spotlight Studios. "We put them according to age and ability and teach them how to interact and work together as a group. It's proven to be a very popular program with both kids and adults."

Griffin opened Spotlight three years ago after managing Kennelly Keys, a local music store.

He is a self-taught musician, who has been playing the guitar since he was a teen.

"When I was a child, I loved anything that made noise," he says with a laugh. "I wanted to be like Elton John. I taught myself to play the piano and then the guitar. At 13, I turned a corner and became serious about music. I studied and copied the musicians I liked and eventually began playing in a few bands."

Griffin was 17 when he had his first professional gig, at the once famous Seattle bar, Vogue, where the likes of Nirvana and Alice in Chains used to grace the stage.

"I did the heavy metal thing for awhile and then moved on to pop rock, with a band called Chronically Strange," he adds. "It was a near success story. When that ended, I started teaching and doing more writing and recording."

Griffin saw a need for a music facility in the area that would be more than just a school. He wanted to create a destination place for musicians of all ages. The vision became reality with Spotlight Studios.

"We offer instruction in almost every instrument except the accordion," comments Griffin. "And we give voice lessons, too. We also rent instruments and provide studio and recording space and rehearsal rooms. Plus, we have a small retail operation where we sell accessories for some of the more common musical instruments. And then of course we have the jam academy and in summer, we run camps for kids and teens."

The facility has expanded its space and moved once since opening. And soon it will expand even further with the acquisition of more square footage in its existing building.

"We started with six teachers and today we have 17," remarks Griffin. "And I have about 700 clients on my mailing list."

Griffin attributes Spotlight's growth to the success of its programs, but more importantly he says it's the environment that really makes the difference.

"It's a fun, positive place," he says. "The teachers are great and they work well with the different age groups. People like coming here. Music is a wonderful pastime and it's something everyone can take home with them."

He adds, "Our goal is for our clients to have an enjoyable experience when they're here, whether they're taking lessons, rehearsing or playing in a jam session."

Griffin consistently gets positive feedback from his clients, which he believes is the best measure of success. Kids tell him they love being at Spotlight and look forward to their sessions. And parents are equally enamored.

"Spotlight has been wonderful for my children," comments Rebecca Carter. "It's really meant the world to them. They just love going there because the atmosphere is so welcoming and everyone is so enthusiastic."

Carter has two kids who have been taking lessons at the studio and participating in the jam academy.

Her son, Wade, 7, plays the electric guitar and her daughter, Allison, 9, is studying voice. She adds, "They're both in a kids' band called The Blah Blahs and they're going to be performing at Big Daddy's along with a few other groups.

"They've also been invited to play at Kids Day for the Seattle Storm at Key Arena. And my daughter has been asked to sing the National Anthem, which is such an honor! I think this is a great testament to Spotlight Studios."

Griffin would eventually like to open a second studio location, but in order to do that, he says, "I'm told I need to clone myself!"

In the meantime, he has hired more staff to help him manage the place and ensure that the high quality standards he put in place remain.