

Chris Smith: Who was that kid who rocked with Buddy Guy at the Luther Burbank Center?

A special treat at Buddy Guy's Luther Burbank Center blues concert was a surprise performance by 11-year-old Ryan Woodard. |

If you were at the Buddy Guy concert last weekend at the Luther Burbank Center, you tell me:

Did jaws drop and skin tingle when the ageless bluesman invited a boy from the audience onto the stage and handed him a guitar, and the kid absolutely and astonishingly rocked out?

That's what I heard. It took awhile, but I found that the boy is Santa Rosa native Ryan Woodard, a sixth-grader at San Miguel School.

Ryan tunes his guitars by ear. Though he now has a guitar teacher, he taught himself to play through observation and the Xbox game, Rocksmith. Mention most any rock or metal album going back to the '70s and Ryan can tell you its release date, the names of everyone in the band and the record's major titles.

And Ryan lives with autism.

He was officially diagnosed at 3. "We knew about it by age 2," said his dad, Travis Woodard, the general manager of Urban Tree Farm Nursery.

His earliest musical fascinations were Michael Jackson and the Beatles. He first picked up a guitar, a Fender Starcaster, about two years ago.

Nowadays he plays at least two hours a day on school days, four hours a day on weekends and up to eight hours a day during summer vacation.

Ryan's guitar teacher, Sam Hurley, said his musical skill and comprehension generally match that of a senior in college.

Playing the guitar and constantly staying up on music is helping Ryan in school and in life. He used to be in a special ed class for students with moderate to severe autism, but two years ago stepped up to special day classes.

Want to hear him play? I do, too.

Ryan and the Crushers, the house band of the Sonoma County Music Coalition, are set to play May 9 at the Wednesday Night Market in Santa Rosa's Old Courthouse Square, at 7 p.m. on June 3 at the Arlene Francis Center on West Sixth Street.

You can be sure that we'll be hearing more from, and about, Ryan Woodard.