

## Mayhem Long Island and its neurodivergent members celebrate 10 years



Members of Mayhem LI, a neurodivergent classic rock band, talk about performing at the ROX Neurodivergent Tour at Port Authority. Credit: Newsday/Kendall Rodriguez; Jeff Bachner

By Valerie Kellogg

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It must have been destiny for Merrick's Michael Korins.

Korins, who has autism, began singing at 2 years old after hearing his father, Dan, belt out the opening chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, also known as the "Fate Symphony." He started singing songs he heard, mostly Disney tunes, "flawlessly," said his mother Ellen Schuchman, 71. She and her husband took notice of their son's proclivity for music, buying him a keyboard.

Within two years, Korins was in piano lessons and then voice lessons. Soon, he was "the first student with disabilities" in his school district to make the All-State Chorus, recalled Schuchman, a housing manager.

Today, the 31-year-old tenor with a three-octave voice is the frontman for the rock band Mayhem Long Island.

Mayhem Long Island is scheduled to play June 5 in Times Square. For more information about the show, go to [MayhemLI.com](http://MayhemLI.com) or follow the band on Facebook at "[Mayhem LI](https://www.facebook.com/MayhemLI)" or on Instagram at [@MayhemLongIsland](https://www.instagram.com/MayhemLongIsland).

"He comes alive when he sings, and that's how he mostly communicates and where his emotion comes from, and people recognize that," said Dan Korins, 74, a retired software engineer who is also a guitarist.

The eight musicians in Mayhem Long Island celebrated the group's 10th anniversary in April, which is National Autism Acceptance Month. The designation honors the experiences and identities of those with autism, who can experience "problems with social communication and interaction, and restricted or repetitive behaviors or interests," according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Earlier this month, the agency released a report that found an estimated 1 in 31 U.S. children have autism.



Members of Mayhem LI, from left, Payam Eftekhazadeh, Brian Pollack, Sean Gaffney, Xavier Martini, Andrew Crisanti, Michael Korins, Ari Amir, Brian Falzon and Jackson Katz. Credit: Jeff Bachner

The band members, two of whom started the classic rock cover band in one of their basements, said they identify as either autistic or having a disability of some kind. Almost all who play instruments do double duty as background vocalists on songs like Joan Jett & The Blackheart's "I Hate Myself for Loving You," Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" and The Beatles' "Come Together." Sometimes the iconic songs are performed with the band's own arrangements.

The group played at the Port Authority Bus Terminal on April 3 as headliners for the 2025 ROX Neurodivergent Tour, with sets seen or heard by thousands of commuters traversing the midtown hub. The band rounded out the month with shows that drew fans to Dox in Island Park and Dave & Buster's in Westbury. This spring's robust schedule includes appearances at Camp Anchor in Lido Beach, the Nassau BOCES Carman Road School in Massapequa Park, East Meadow Community Day and – in a first for the band – Times Square.

Long Island musician Jared Feldman has been coaching Mayhem Long Island for seven years. He owns Farmingdale-based Music for Everyone, including its Spin DJ Academy education program, offering classes at its studios and online, as well as at community centers, schools and in homes. The band's musicians take Feldman's live performance instruction classes, and many are also in private instrument lessons.

"They came to us, and we started putting them through the paces of what it takes to really be a performing act ... They've really become quite a good band," said Feldman, a drummer and trained classical percussionist who has banged it out in rock bands over the years. Some Mayhem members work with private teachers, and neurotypical musicians and instructors often play with the band, he said.



Andrew Crisanti, 34, plays lead guitar in the band. Credit: Newsday/Kendall Rodriguez

## **THERAPY LED TO GUITAR**

Levittown resident Andrew Crisanti, 34, joined as lead guitarist in 2018. His interest in music started at 13 as he was recovering from brain surgery. “I played the Guitar Hero series when I was having occupational therapy,” said Crisanti, who works part time at a bowling alley. Crisanti has brain dysplasia, said his mother, Karen Bray, 55. The disorder is a genetic condition that can cause epilepsy, according to the nonprofit Cleveland Clinic academic medical center, and doctors removed a large portion of the right side of his brain to treat intractable seizures, Bray said. The video game helped strengthen his eye-hand coordination, she said.

After mastering the game at home over the course of the next year, Crisanti’s parents bought him a guitar and put him in lessons, said Bray, who runs a portable diagnostic company. “He’s a different person when he plays.”

She noted playing guitar has given her son confidence. He would probably agree.

“Being with the band is one of the best things that’s ever happened to me,” said Crisanti, who jams on a lime green Reverend Super Rev.



Drummer Brian Pollack said he is moved when he sees the smiles the band puts on students’ faces. Credit: Newsday/Kendall Rodriguez

## **PLAYING TO THE AUDIENCE**

Harvey Pollack, 74, who is retired from owning a metal finishing business, knew Crisanti’s parents and first saw their son play on Facebook. He said he courted Crisanti for a year until persuading him to join son Brian, now 34, and the band’s co-founder Xavier Martini, 33.

“He went from no, I don’t want to sing, to now having his own microphone and learning every song and singing backup,” Bray said. “He looks people in the eye, and he’s proud.”

Brian Pollack, 34, the band's drummer, said he thought starting a band "would be something really cool to do." He and Martini, who plays piano, did that in the basement of the Pollack family's Merrick home. The two went with the moniker Mayhem Long Island because it's a "really, really, really cool name," Pollack said.

He started drumming when he was 6, but said he got serious in his 20s and began lessons. The work paid off, with one audience member asking him for his autograph during an Amityville show, he said.

One of Pollack's greatest joys, he said, is performing from time to time for students at the Nassau BOCES Rosemary Kennedy Center in Wantagh.

"They're with staff, and a lot of them are blind, and they have trouble walking, and they make noises, and that's one of their disabilities that they can't help," said Pollack, who has worked 14 years as a parking lot attendant at The Home Depot in Levittown.

Pollack said he is moved when he sees the smiles the band puts on students' faces.

"It just gets me really emotional, because I have autism, too," he said.



Lead singer Michael Korins performs with the band at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. Credit: Jeff Bachner

## **PRIDE ALL AROUND**

There's a sense of pride among the parents who are "very" involved in or supportive of the band, Feldman said.

"We're very surprised that it's developed this way," Harvey Pollack said. "When we first started, they would get together just down in the basement. And then when they started playing out ... the musicians realized that they needed some more PA equipment. And it was a coincidence that we met

Jared. He sort of brought us over to the next level, where we were able to ... play in many venues.”

In the process, Bray and her husband, Donald, 58, a retired government worker, have made friends with the other parents. “We’re a nice, tight little group,” she said.

For Brian Pollack, the band has “opened up an avenue” for him, his father said. “It’s done an amazing job for him in that he’s busy a lot with the music,” Harvey Pollack said. “It gives him a great outlet, and he’s very proud of himself.”



Mayhem bandmates Michael Korins, from left, Xavier Martini, Andrew Crisanti, Brian Falzon and Jackson Katz rehearse. Credit: Newsday/Kendall Rodriguez

## FANS SEE THEMSELVES

So are his fans.



Erin Murphy, 33, who lives in Merrick and works part time at a supermarket, goes to as many shows as she can, usually wearing a Mayhem Long Island T-shirt or bracelet, she said. Proceeds from merchandise sales go to support the band.

Murphy met Crisanti one summer at Hempstead Town's Camp Anchor, which serves "children and adults with special needs throughout the summer," according to the town website.

"What I love most is that they can get any of us up out of our seats dancing along to a lot of the hits, and all of us will start singing along to a lot of their songs," said Murphy, whose father said she has an intellectual disability.

Murphy said she also finds inspiration in Mayhem Long Island performances.

"We can be in the public and actually perform and do what anybody else can do," she said. "So it really puts us out there that even though we have disabilities, we can do anything that someone else can."

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The members

Xavier Martini

33

Elmont and Davenport, Florida

Co-founder, main keyboardist, harmonica and backup vocalist

"I am autistic. I take a little more time to process my thoughts. I may be a little difficult for some to understand when I speak, but when I play my music, I feel like I connect much better with the world."

Brian Falzon

32

Baldwin

Rhythm guitarist

“It's exciting to be in a band that brings happiness to people that hear us. ... It's also changed my life by choosing joy and just feeling good.”

Jonathan Friedland

34

Plainview

Background vocals and percussionist

“Being in Mayhem provides me with the opportunity to collaborate with my bandmates and make new friends.”

Ari Amir

29

Great Neck

Percussionist

“My favorite song is ‘Come Together’ by The Beatles because we made it our own, and I love doing the fills on the bongos.”

Jackson Katz

24

Merrick

Keyboardist

“I have autism and other challenges, and I see the world differently than neurotypicals. Some daily living skills, like decision-making, are more challenging for me than others. At the same time, I have many talents that many neurotypicals don't have, such as perfect pitch and other music capabilities, excellent memory, technological skills and more.”

Payam Eftekharzadeh

39

Great Neck

Lighting and production assistant

“I'm just really happy that they allowed me to join.”

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